

Sali Kecil

A Hidden Diving Paradise

By Anita Verde

Photographs by: Anita Verde and Peter Marshall

We divers are an opinionated lot, and although we don't often agree, there's generally a consensus amongst us that the Asia Pacific region takes first prize when it comes to incredible diving. So when we were deciding where to spend our first international diving vacation post covid; where could be better than somewhere half way between Raja Ampat and the Lembah Strait?

Ok, see if you can guess. Lush volcanic peaks framed by swaying coconut palms, coarse sandy beaches extending to submerged coral gardens, and a mysterious atmosphere like no where else. Where you mistake the sound of a flock of Hornbills for that of a helicopter, and you'd almost swear the water was Gin, it's that clear. We're talking about Sali Kecil, a tiny island located in the Strait of Bacan. Ok, be honest, you've probably never heard of it, and even if you have you've only got a vague idea of where it is.

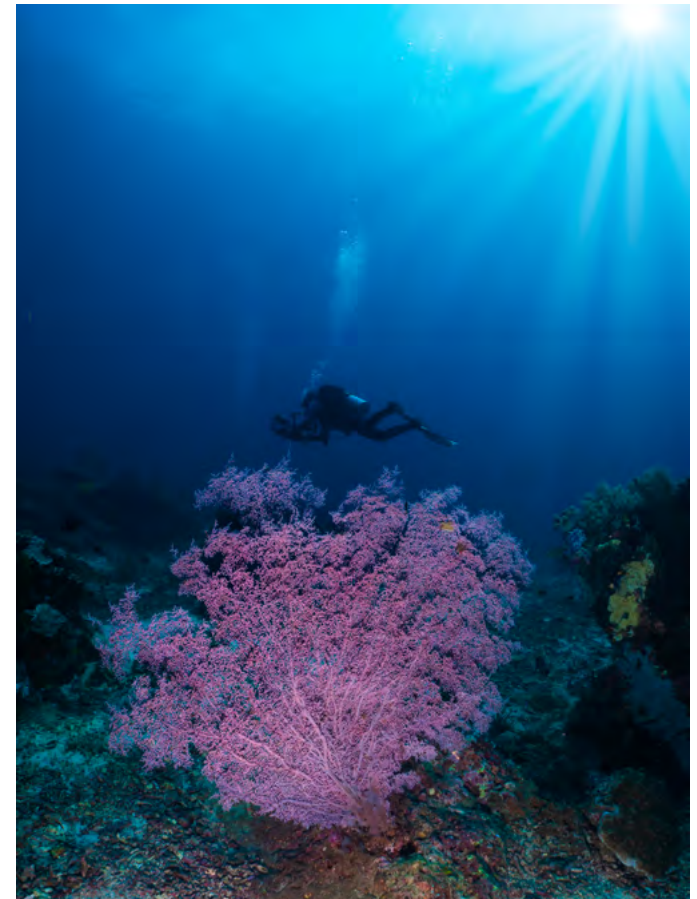
It is not our first time here. We were here in early 2020; just before the world and travel as we know it came to the ultimate stand still. And although a lot has sadly changed in Indonesia over the past 2 years; with many resort's being forced to close; the sea here is the same biodiverse epicentre it always was. As some of the last International guests to leave pre covid; and the very first two people to arrive back; we couldn't have been happier!

Located in the rarely visited waters of the southern reaches of the Indonesian island of Halmahera, and enviously located between the Lembah Strait and Raja Ampat, the waters around this sparsely populated island are amongst the most impressive of all marine biodiversity hot spots. The waters remain uncharted, and despite its location amidst the richest seas on earth, the area remains remarkably un-noticed, even for the most intrepid of wanderers.

With the sea full of promise we are fuelled with anticipation as to what the diving here this time round will bring. Upon submersion, we find ourselves yet again amidst pristine coral gardens, complete with the unpredictable currents that characterise the region.

The islands of Sali Kecil (the small one) where the resort of Sali Bay is located, and Sali Besar (the big one) are smack bang in the middle of the strait between Bacan and the main island of Halmahera. This location means that careful planning and selection of dive sites is required for safe diving. If you get it wrong, it's all 'washing machines' and 'mission impossible' photography.

Panasonic GH5 in a Nauticam housing with Sea and Sea YSD2 strobes, Lumix G X Vario 14-42 mm power, plus the Nauticam WWL-1, 1/125 sec @F9, ISO 200
© Peter Marshall

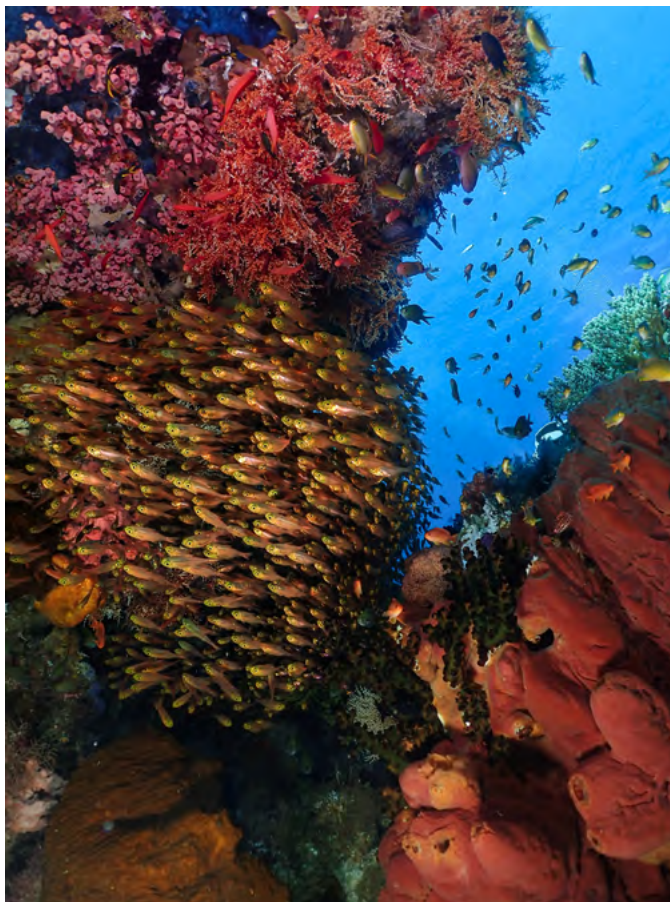


But the currents also mean the corals here are colossal. On each dive, we are dwarfed by gigantic gorgonians, brain corals, elephant ear and barrel sponges. Table corals and large gardens of cabbage coral are also prevalent. When the current is lively, delicate soft corals in a fury of pink and orange also reveal themselves, providing a safe haven for numerous species of juvenile fish.

The resort's remote location means access to 60 known dive sites, and given much of the area is yet to be explored there is also the opportunity to add to this list with additional exploratory diving. We managed to visit 25 sites during our stay, all of which were uniquely breathtaking. It would take a lifetime to discover all of the dive sites in the area, a challenge we hope to continue to undertake.

Whether your exploring the areas's many sloping reefs, drop-offs or delicate coral gardens, wandering in the blue or getting down in the muck, you'll find healthy populations of reef sharks, turtles, batfish, rays, bumphead parrotfish, napoleon wrasse, and more strange critters than you can begin to identify.

Given its envious location, it's not surprising that the biodiversity of marine life here is outstanding, yet its remoteness combined with a lack of marine survey data means the region is literally a 'black box', with very little understood. The only significant indicator of the region's potential are the impressive results from a survey undertaken in 2005 in the south-western part of Halmahera, where renowned ichthyologist and marine zoologist Dr Gerald Allen recorded a total of 803 species of reef fish over 37 hours underwater at 28 locations. This is impressive given he recorded 828 species in Raja Ampat during a similar survey conducted over 60 hours in 2001. So maybe it's not



difficult to suggest that the region's biodiversity could be comparable to that of Raja Ampat.

You'll see almost every species of pygmy seahorse here, they star on every dive, and in 2013 a new species of walking shark was also discovered, *Hemiscyllium Halmahera*. Also known as the bamboo shark or long tail carpet shark, these sharks prefer to walk rather than swim by wriggling their bodies and pushing with their pectoral and pelvic fins. Relatively small, the species here is believed to reach a maximum of 70 cm in length. Seeing this shy creature is easy as it's made a home in the



(Above) Panasonic GH5 in a Nauticam housing with Sea and Sea YSD2 strobes, Olympus M Zuiko Digital ED 60 mm f2.8 macro lens, plus the Nauticam CMC-1, 1/200 sec @ F11, ISO 200 © Anita Verde

(Left) Olympus TG-4 with AOI UWL-04A wide lens, 1/30th @ F9, 100 ISO © Peter Marshall

shallow waters just off the the resort's jetty. A dive in the late evening will give you the best chance for an encounter. We were lucky to see one during a night dive on the resort's stunning house reef. Shy but curiously it peaked out at us from under a coral boulder before slowly shuffling backwards into the darkness. No photograph could ever hope to capture the intimacy of the encounter.

All of this, alongside incredible macro photography opportunities, the chance of seeing of dolphins and numerous species of whale, makes the region a very enticing dive destination. The topside



Olympus TG-4 with AOI UWL-04A wide lens, 1/30th @ F9. 100 ISO
© Peter Marshall

scenery doesn't disappoint either, with lush volcanic peaks and dense jungle vegetation, free from deforestation and inhabited by numerous species of bird and monkey.

The owners of the resort, a consortium from Italy and Switzerland are committed to protecting the marine environment and are currently working with the Indonesian government to protect the region's unique biodiversity through the ambitious establishment of a marine

park. To date, talks have been lengthy and are ongoing, but something tells me their passion for the region will help them succeed.

Want to dive here? Sali Bay Resort is located on the island of Sali Kecil in a protected bay in the Southern reaches of the island of Halmahera (North Maluku) Indonesia.

The resort caters to guests in twelve beach front deluxe villa accommodations nestled delicately on the shoreline with direct access to the



(Above) Panasonic GH5 in a Nauticam housing with Sea and Sea YSD2 strobes, Olympus M Zuiko Digital ED 60 mm f2.8 macro lens, plus the Nauticam CMC-1, 1/200 sec @ F11, ISO 200 © Anita Verde

sea. Larger groups can also book the Diver's Lodge, located at the end of the bay and consisting of four rooms with private bathrooms and a wide veranda facing the sea.

Custom built dive boats and experienced guides take divers on challenging exploratory dive trips in the remote Halmahera sea, and underwater photographers are well catered for with a dedicated camera room and facilities. Twelve litre

aluminium tanks with DIN and INT valves are provided and Nitrox is available.

The resort is also a paradise for snorkelers, and has the most beautifully intact and healthy house reef we've seen. A fresh water pool, intimate spa and fabulous food tops off the experience. Italian, German, English, Indonesian and French are fluently spoken by staff.

Although the official wet season





is considered to be November to March, Sali Kecil is protected by the islands of Ambon, Halmahera and Bacan, and therefore receives very little rain. We visited in March and experienced clear sunny skies and calm seas.

Getting there

Halmahera is not an easy travel destination, and a visit to these uncharted waters should be considered not only an adventure but a privilege.

Sali Bay Resort is a 20 minute overland trip followed by a 50 minute boat ride from Pulau Bacan's Labhua

airport. Labhua airport is serviced daily from North Sulawesi's capital Manado with a stop over in Ternate. Singapore Airlines' subsidiary Silk Air runs flights from Singapore to Manado four times per week. Note: that flight schedules have been significantly disrupted over the past 2 years, and at the time of writing were just beginning to re establish their frequency to pre-pandemic levels.

Anita Verde

www.summitstoseasphotography.com

www.salibayresort.com



Anita Verde and Peter Marshall have a passion for the planet's wild places, and through their images and narratives hope to inspire better appreciation and protection of the natural world. Based in Melbourne, Australia, they have professional backgrounds in tourism strategy, environmental sustainability, and government relations. When they are not underwater or on a mountaintop, they also work professionally as strategic consultants, advising governments and industry on sustainable destination planning and development, investment attraction, government relations, brand strategy and marketing.

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A week in the Maldives

by Peishan Tan



We'd originally planned to go to Maldives in 2020, but of course, the pandemic put a halt to the plans. As soon as flights there were greenlighted by the Singapore government, and quarantine restrictions were lifted, we booked in our trip. Up until we actually set foot on the island though, I was constantly trying to tamp down my anticipation.

What a glorious week it was! I'd picked well selecting Villamendhoo as our resort island of choice. For its over the water villas, but most importantly, for its raved about house reef. We debated long and hard about bringing our own SUP boards, so we could go for a paddle at sunrise. Ultimately though, the strict seaplane baggage limits caused us to drop that idea, and we easily filled our days from dawn to dusk everyday on the water anyway, either snorkeling or diving.

The diving was outstanding – the dive center put up dive boat excursions to various reefs for the next day every evening, and we'd go eagerly up to the boards outside the dive center to choose our new adventures – anywhere from full day affairs on long haul trips up north to see the mantas, down south to spot whale sharks, to exciting dawn dives at the nearby thias, the Maldivian word for underwater mountains. We signed up for most of them.