

Welcome back to travel

by Paul 'Duxy' Duxfield

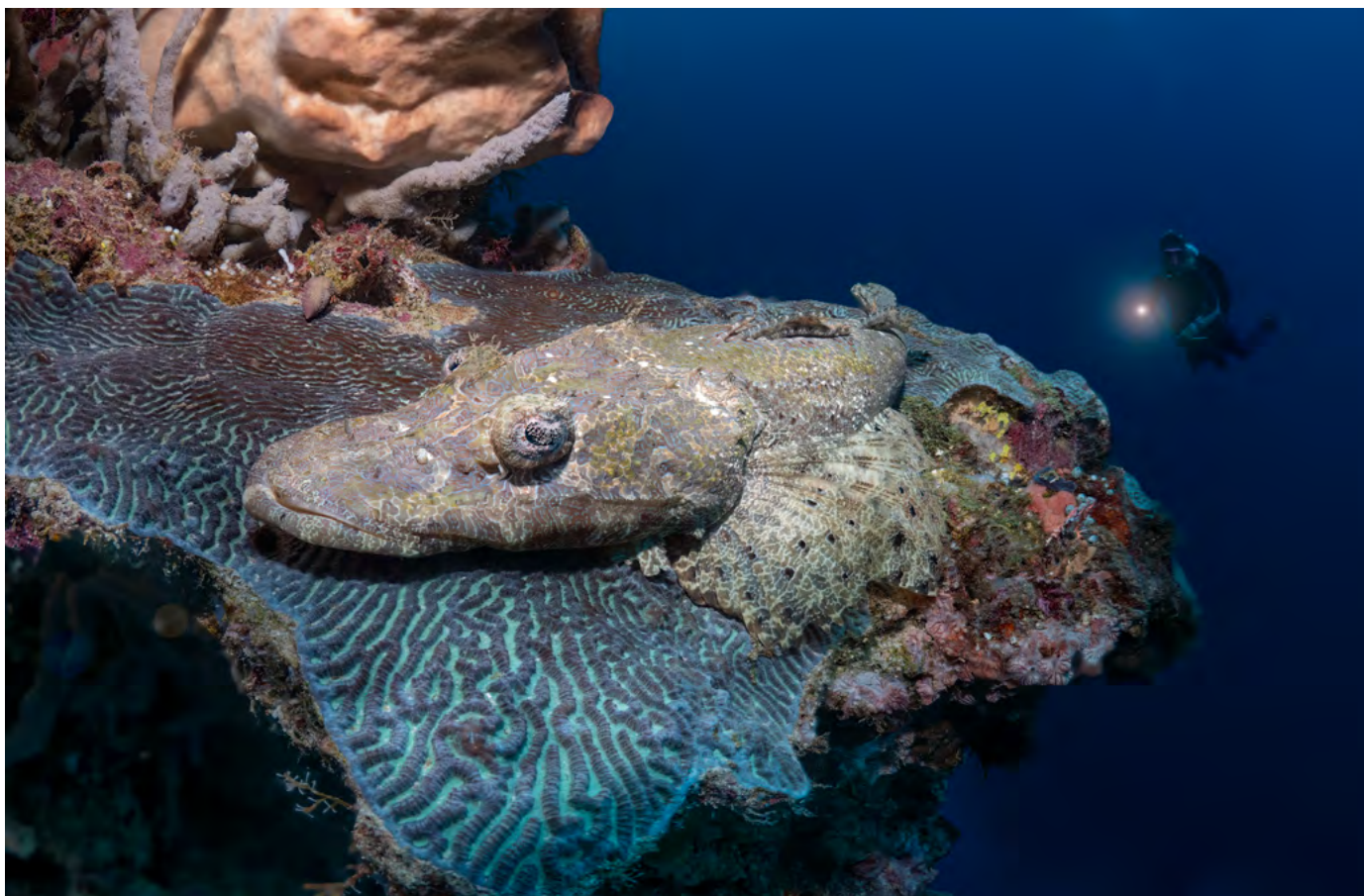
2022 has been a busy year for me, and I guess it's felt even busier as those of us involved with travel have had to come back up to speed after a couple of years of no travel at all.

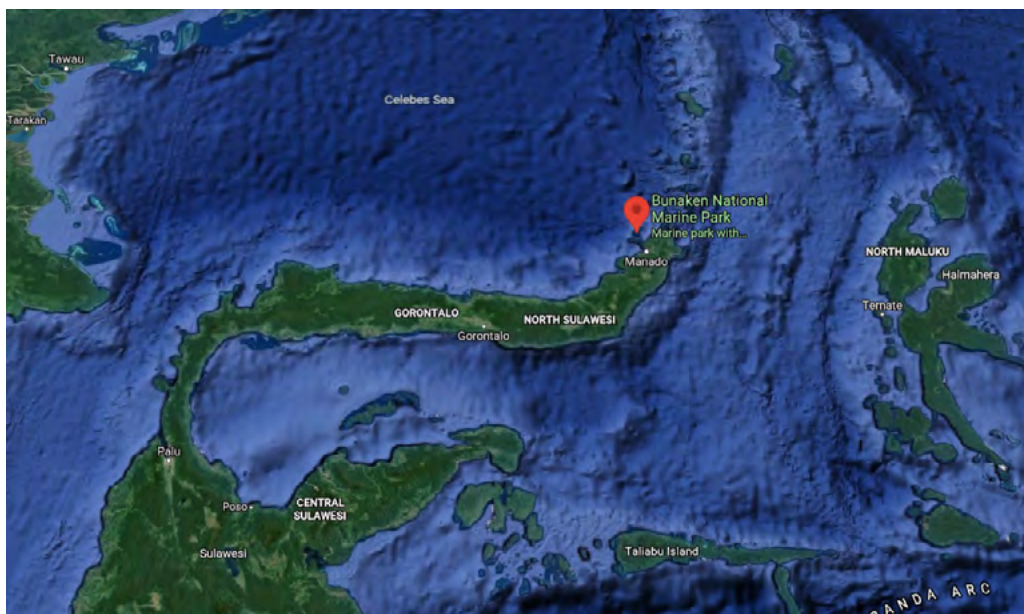
For me it started back in November 2021 with a return to Egypt, but then with a vengeance in February and March '22 with an extended stay in Belize as I had to step in for a colleague who had come down with Covid.

And from there it was full steam ahead for the bulk of last year with, for me, a record number of days away in 2022, all over the planet.

Alongside my dive tours I have been running a lot of snorkelling trips this year, and will be again for the foreseeable future, and they've provided me with a great opportunity to shoot a lot more with compact more manageable choices, so I made a conscious decision at the start of last year to really get to grips with the tools that a lot of my new clients use, like Olympus Tough's and also the newer GoPro's (10's and 11s') which I've been particularly impressed with, and not just for video either.

There's ways to squeeze the maximum out of these little marvels for stills shooters too, but I digress, and I'd really like to concentrate this article on a magical place I had the very good fortune to visit in October and share with you all my feelings about the location and not only from a photography





point of view either.

Bunaken Oasis is a diving and spa resort in Northern Sulawesi, Indonesia, and is a place I've been meaning to visit ever since they opened.

I have to declare that I have a previous connection with the owners Simon and Elaine Wallace, as they came on a couple of my early Photo Workshops and so I was very keen to see what they would come up with when they first announced that they were thinking of building a fully fledged luxurious Indonesian resort employing lots of local people and with environmental ethics and sustainability at the very centre of their business model.

They started with a complete

blank canvas with which to create their vision on Bunaken Island itself, and spoiler alert, they appear to have realised their goals, and some.

Bunaken and the Coral Triangle

As a place to build a luxury resort for divers and snorkelers then at the vibrant beating heart of Bunaken Marine National Park isn't a bad location to start.

For those of you that aren't familiar with the Bunaken area it's positioned at the centre of the Coral Triangle that covers the countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, the Solomons and the Philippines, and is famed for being the



most coral dense location across the planet.

And all those corals, along with the mangroves provide a home for a vast diversity of creatures all across the living spectrum.

It's often referred to as the Amazon of the seas, such is its importance to marine biologists.

The Bunaken Marine park itself which was founded in 1991, spans nearly a 1000 square kilometres of protected environment, with a more than 90% marine environment with a proliferation of hard and soft corals, nearly 400 species up to date,

with new species being discovered regularly.

There's around 3000 species of fish that make this place their home, a proliferation of other marine organisms including nudibranchs, crustaceans and molluscs and more turtles than you could possibly shake a snorkel at, alongside occasional larger visitors like whales and dolphins that are able to feed on the bounty that gets carried in upwellings from the huge underwater canyons that separate the islands.

On my first visit to the area around 15 years ago, I was



overwhelmed with the choices presented to me as an underwater photographer, but even if you're not armed with a camera it's an absolute feast for the visual sense, and not just below the waterline too, the skyline is punctuated with tropical rainforest and volcanoes.

So to be surrounded by all of this cosseted within the comfort of a resort like Bunaken Oasis really takes the experience up a notch.

Bunaken Oasis Dive Resort and Spa

I've stayed in a lot of Indonesian diving resorts, and they've all been

really good at serving the underwater photographer and the service has been excellent, but nothing I've experienced thus far prepared me for how well, Bunaken Oasis was able to meet the needs of underwater photographers and all those in need of a stunning location to relax and unwind.

These journeys though start at the airport and after being efficiently picked up at Sam Ratulangi Airport in Manado, we were whisked off to a small private ferry port and onto one of the resorts locally styled dive boats for a short ride across to the resort itself.

Upon disembarkation you meet the staff and make your way

to the Long House, a really beautiful reception that is open and airy, all very stylish and classy.

So whilst sipping a welcome drink we filled in our forms, and then were shown to our personal villas, passing the impressive pool area

These villas have been designed like the rest of the resort with absolute comfort in mind.

And as well as the centrepiece, a fully netted four poster, there's every possible amenity at hand.

Your own hot and cold water dispenser, an automatic coffee machine, quality furniture that's not just there as decoration, even if it does

look and feel gorgeous, there was even a tablet loaded with fish guides and a Bluetooth speaker for your tunes.

There is of course a wonderful bathroom exactly as you'd expect.

My favourite feature of the villas though was the huge verandah and balcony that overlooks the resort, and a great place to look out towards the dramatic horizons of North Sulawesi with a cuppa, or a beer in hand.

And they've thought of everything, an example of which would be the drop down storm curtains that envelop the verandah in case the mercurial tropical weather



takes a turn for the worst.

Marianne a fellow traveller and underwater photographer said of the villas that they were “magical and like a mini version of the bigger resort itself”

Elaine one of the owners is a very keen underwater photographer so it's no surprise that the facilities for underwater photographers have been chosen very wisely.

The camera room is very spacious, with individual cubicles with more than enough power points, the air inside is climate controlled.

You can even leave all your AA strobe batteries at home if you like as they have a lending service, which

all they ask for you is a voluntary donation to a local charity.

The camera room is located logically for you to prep and store your kit there, as it's just off to the side of the Long House which you will always pass through on your way to and from the boats.

Divers and snorkelers inevitably build up an appetite, and the restaurant on site is truly world class, and you won't be disappointed with breakfast, lunch and dinner.

And they will happily cater to all needs, and whilst eating you'll enjoy a fabulous view across the water.

And after a days diving you'll probably be wanting to unwind and

share some of the days exploits over a beer or a cocktail before dinner, so located just below the restaurant is a well stocked bar and a very attentive barman.

Underwater Photography

Ok, I'm assuming that the majority of the folk reading this are divers and underwater photographers.

And so I'm sharing a few pictures that I took in the short time I was there, on the world famous walls of Lekuan's 1,2 and 3.

I didn't spend enough time to switch over to my macro lens, but rest assured after diving this area many times there are more than enough macro opportunities here, in fact a lot of sites really can rival nearby Lembeh, so it really is a given that whatever you like to shoot, this place can deliver up macro and wide options aplenty.

In fact the recently discovered Pontohi Pygmy Sea Horse was found here, it's named after the renowned dive guide Hence Pontoh who brought this tiny marvel to the attention of the world and who works at the resort.

A place for everyone

Tech divers are well served here too with a dedicated tech diving facility for those that want to explore the walls for deeper and longer.

This fabulous resort really does deliver from every possible angle for the underwater explorer, however unlike a lot of resorts in this part of the world, I'd suggest that it is also a great place for people who'd just like to relax in first class surroundings, their every need catered for.

So if you've a partner or friend who doesn't normally accompany you on a dive trip because the resort was very focussed upon the divers needs, then I'd say that this is possibly the best place to bring them along and whilst you're diving they can enjoy a relaxing spa treatment or lounge around the beautiful infinity pool.

A win win for everybody concerned.

I can't wait to go back.

Big thanks to Georgie Bartlett who is based in the UK and organised my trip, and of course to Elaine and Simon Wallace who made the trip possible.

Paul 'Duxy' Duxfield

www.bunakenoasis.com

Don't settle for 2nd best



Film - No Filter;
No White Balance

Digital - No Filter;
Manual White Balance

Digital - Magic Filter; Manual
White Balance

Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards.

These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter; using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

Simple and inexpensive, yet so effective.

www.magic-filters.com

Reef ID Travel Set with 6240+ species on fishes, nudibranchs, seashells, starfishes, flatworms, crustaceans. Up-to date taxonomy. Paperback, iBook, pdf.



<https://reefidbooks.gumroad.com/>

www.uwpmag.com