

Freediving Gorontalo

by Nicholas Kouvaras

Gorontalo lies on the northern peninsula of Sulawesi, also known as the Minahasa Peninsula. It can be reached by plane directly or through Makassar. In the old times it was known for its port and had been the centre for the spread of Islam in Eastern Indonesia, dating back to the pre-colonial era. The Province of Gorontalo has approximately 1.200.000 inhabitants 98% of them muslim and 90% belonging to the Gorontaloan tribe. One of the biggest in Indonesia.

For the diving community it is known for the Whale Sharks and the Salvador Dali Corals in the Olele Marine Park. Just 30 minutes drive from the city of Gorontalo in the area of Botubarani there is a shrimp processing factory. The waste of the factory, shrimp heads, has attracted whale sharks even before they became an attraction for local and foreign tourists. As our guide said: "Whale sharks eat little lobsters". Meaning the shrimps :-). The industry of Whale Shark watching is now using the shrimp heads to make the sightings more consistent. Still there is no guarantee that the gentle giants will show up every day. One week

before our arrival there were no whale sharks for many days. During our 4 days in Gorontalo there were 2 or 3 of them every day. One of our local guides was telling us about a day where 9 whale sharks showed up.

Our team was 4 freedivers, all based in Jakarta. We flew through Makassar and met with our 2 local guides in Gorontalo. We stayed in the city and the next morning we drove to Botubanari. We checked with the people there and we were informed that 2 whale sharks were present. We dressed up on the beach and got in the boats that would take us to the spot. 20 metres off the shore we saw the first Whale shark. We could have never imagined that the fish were so close to the shore. The huge creature just followed our boat and started eating the shrimp heads while we were getting into the water.

My previous experiences with

Shooting from inside a crevice.

Olympus OM-D E-M5 mark III with

Olympus M.Zuiko Digital ED 8mm f/1.8

Fisheye PRO Lens behind a 4.33" Dome

port in a Nauticam housing and an Orca

Torch D900V. f/8, 1/250sec, ISO800, A

Mode





Happy faces above and below the surface.

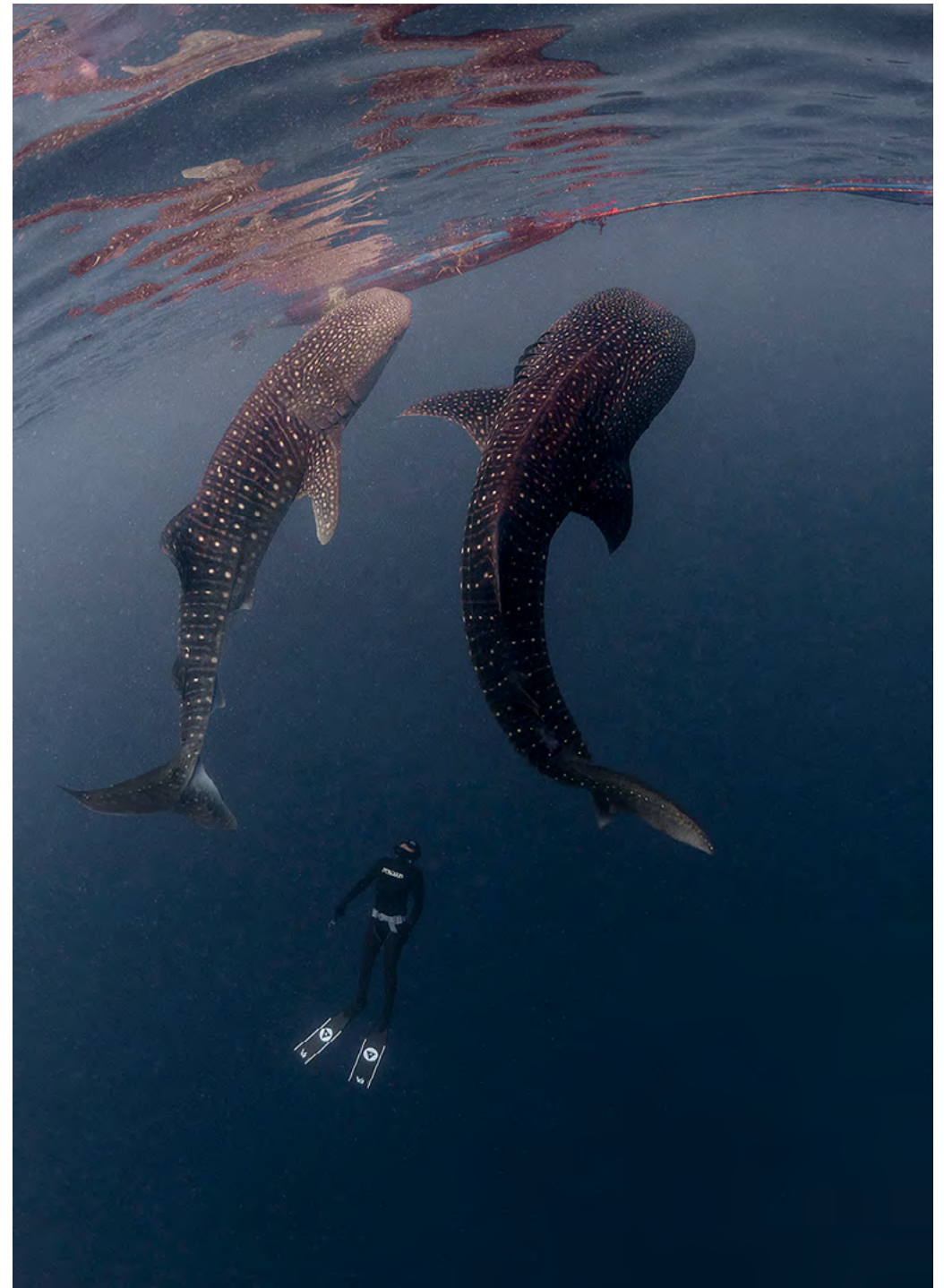
Olympus OM-D E-M5 mark III with Olympus 8mm f/1.8 Fisheye PRO Lens, 4.33" Dome port in a Nauticam housing. f/8, 1/2000 sec, ISO800, A Mode

My friend looks so small.

Olympus OM-D E-M5 mark III with Olympus 8mm f/1.8 Fisheye PRO Lens 4.33" Dome port in a Nauticam housing. f/8, 1/160 sec, ISO800, A Mode

whale sharks were very different. I had random encounters in open water just crossing paths for a few moments and I also dived in Derawan where they feed the sharks on a fishing platform about 10 minutes boat drive from the island. In Derawan it is a crazy house. Snorkelers, divers, people

with life vests all splashing next to the platform. In Gorontalo things were very calm. Even if it was the weekend we were alone in the water. Most of the visitors stayed on the boats and watched from there. The Whale sharks would eat for a while then swim in a big circle and return to eat more.





Our guide was as excited as us.

Olympus OM-D E-M5 mark III with Olympus 8mm f/1.8 Fisheye PRO Lens behind a 4.33" Dome port in a Nauticam housing. f/8, 1/100 sec , ISO400, A Mode

The Cathedral from the top.

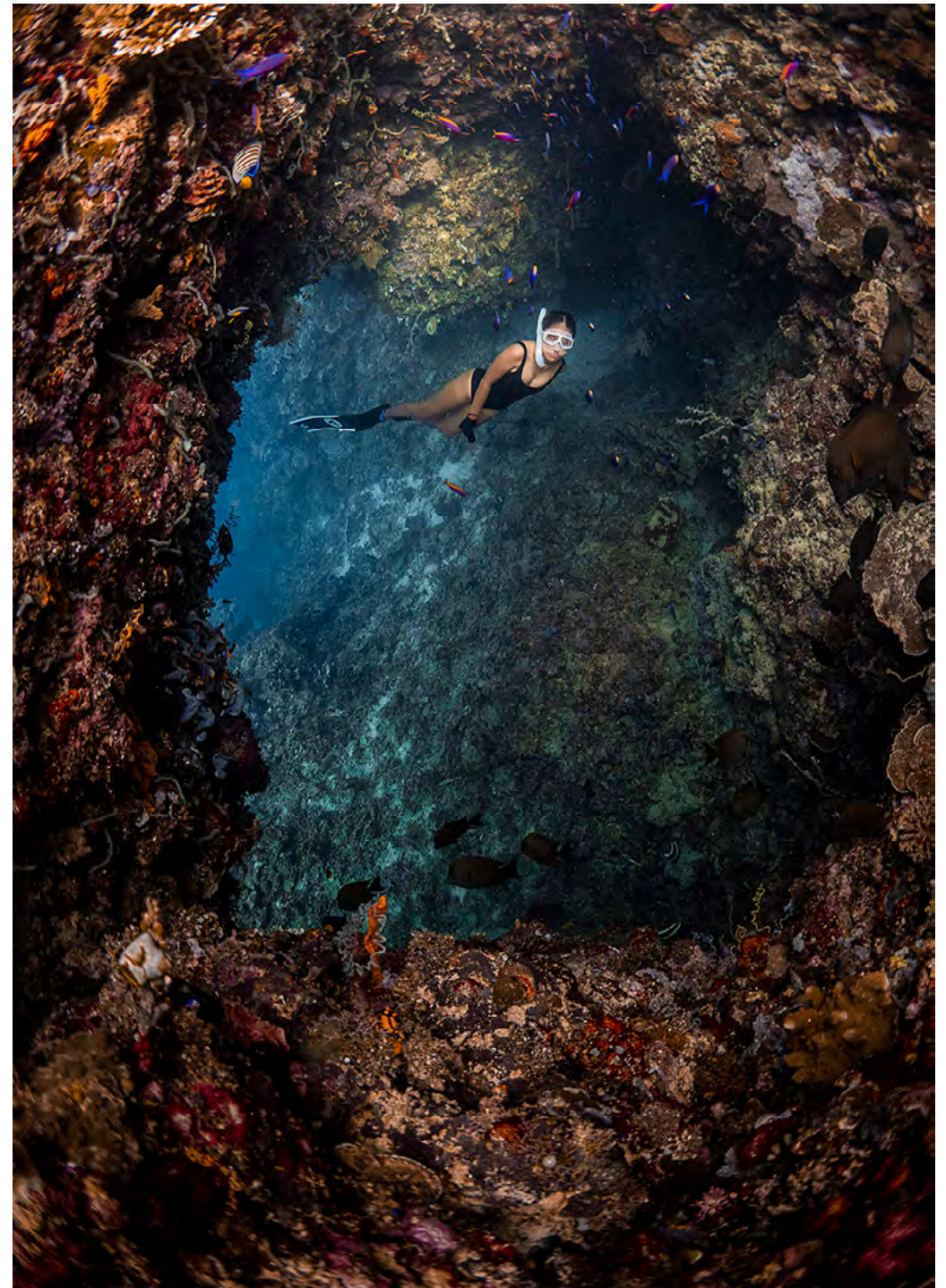
Olympus OM-D E-M5 mark III with Olympus 8mm f/1.8 Fisheye PRO Lens, 4.33" Dome port in a Nauticam housing. f/3.5, 1/250 sec , ISO1600, P Mode

Going from boat to boat. The moment the whale sharks circled around they gave us plenty of photographic opportunities. The other thing that surprised us pleasantly was the visibility. The waters were clear and blue even this close to the shore.

It seems that the whale sharks

visit the area when they are hungry and that there is a large population of these magnificent creatures in the area.

Before arriving I have heard a lot of arguments, for and against feeding Whale Sharks. I am not a marine biologist and I can only convey the





*What a blessing to have clear waters.
Olympus OM-D E-M5 mark III with Olympus 8mm f/1.8
Fisheye PRO Lens, 4.33" Dome port in a Nauticam
housing. f/8, 1/1250 sec, ISO800, A Mode*

*Just outside Jin cave at the Olele Marine Park.
Olympus OM-D E-M5 mark III with Olympus 8mm f/1.8
Fisheye PRO Lens, 4.33" Dome port in a Nauticam
housing and an Orca Torch D900V. f/8, 1/125 sec,
ISO800, A Mode*

feeling I got while being in the water. I felt that the fish have trained the locals to feed them more than the opposite. In Derawan there was a tension on the fish and a sense of struggle. Here the sharks were at home and we were the entertainment. Their movement was more calm, they took time to watch us and often stopped their feeding to swim with us or interact between them.

One of the benefits of having local guides was that we got to stay in the water until we were tired. Even after all the boats were gone the whale sharks kept circling around. Eventually we swam out and had a quick snack before driving to our next spot.



Just 5 minutes away we arrived at Kurenai Beach. One of the favourite dive spots in the area. Clear waters, walls, fresh colourful corals and Salvador Dali coral, widely known as Salvador Dali Sponge. It is a giant sponge that can only be found (endemic) in the waters south of Gorontalo.

Salvador Dali coral or *Petrosia lignosa* was first discovered in 1920 in Gorontalo Bay. Named Salvador Dali by Rantje Allen, an American diver, because the shape of the carved outer skin of this sponge resembles a cavity and resembles a painting entitled 'L'enigma del Desiderio' by Salvador Dali.

We also had the opportunity to dive in a small

cave. Nice to swim through and pretty photogenic. But our mind was set on taking pictures with the rare sponge. We also spotted 2 turtles but they were not open to socialising.

We had our lunch on the beach before going back to the hotel.

The evening had a surreal sense for me. Just opposite our hotel was a decent size mall. So we decided to go to the movies and watch "Black Adam". Diving with whale sharks and going to the movies at the same day was something new for me. Malls and movie theatres usually are far away from pristine corals and gentle giants.

For our second day we decided to stick to the same plan. Whale Sharks in the morning and Kurenai beach for our second dive. The second day the guys were more used to swimming with the whale sharks and we got better pictures. The second day we also had some scuba divers in the water. I don't think that it is a good idea to scuba dive there. The whale sharks spend most of the time on the surface and never go deeper than 5 metres. Snorkelling and freediving makes more sense. On the second dive we dived on the other side of Kurenai beach, next to the port. Again the wall was magnificent and the visibility great. A Salvador Dali was at 22 metres and I could see it from the surface. After our dive we ordered fried bananas served with the local sambal (sauce). The sauce is only for the brave. Next level spiciness even for Indonesian standards. Honestly the hardest part of the second day was selecting which pictures to edit and which to discard.

On the third day we decided to visit the Cathedral and the marine park in Olele. The Cathedral is a small cave with a beautiful arc. Early in the morning and late in the afternoon it provides



*It is a cliché but I could not help myself clicking.
Olympus OM-D E-M5 mark III with Olympus M.Zuiko Digital ED 8mm f/1.8
Fisheye PRO Lens behind a 4.33" Dome port in a Nauticam housing. f/8,
1/200 sec, ISO400, A Mode*

nice sun rays. It is not deeper than 10 metres and it is very photogenic. We should have gone earlier and we should have checked the tides. After a while the current got stronger and made it hard to stay on the spot. The nice thing about the cathedral is that it is also nice outside. The rocks form small pools that are great for pictures. As I said we should have gone earlier.

Olele is further away. It is almost 90 minutes drive from Gorontalo city but the scenery, on the way, is very rewarding. Mountains, beaches and jungle are all so close together. The small village next to the Olele marine park is untouched by time and we ordered some food to be ready on our return. We boarded a small pontoon powered by what seemed to be some kind of gardening tool transformed in some magical way to an outboard.

Our destination was Jin cave. A small blue hole surrounded by the jungle with very nice rock formations and big corals. During our diving there we discovered lots of crevices in the wall and some small caves. We explored, took pictures along the wall and we allowed the caves and rock formations to frame our pictures. Fatigue eventually won. After 3 days of doing double dives everybody was super tired. We shared a wonderful lunch with the locals on the beach and headed back to the hotel.

We spent the last day sightseeing in the city, buying souvenirs and driving around with bentors before flying back to Jakarta. The bentor is the local "taxi", a homemade tricycle. Half bench on wheels, half motorcycle. Very colourful and very fun to ride.

Tips.

Hire a local guide. It makes things a lot easier and opens a lot of doors. Stay away from the sun. Sun block is not enough to protect you. People in Gorontalo are very religious. Be respectful to their culture. Check if the whale sharks are there before getting into the water. Have plenty of hard drive space. Beware of the sambal (sauce). Thank you and enjoy the Ocean.

Nicholas Kouvaras



<https://www.youtube.com/@NicholasKouvarasUW/videos>

www.uwpmag.com

We've got you covered!



Magic filters are now available in 3 options. Original Magic for use in blue water with DSLR and compact cameras with Manual White Balance, Auto-Magic for compact cameras in automatic point and shoot mode. GreenWater Magic for use in green water with DSLR and compact cameras with Manual White Balance. Prices start at just £22.

The Auto-Magic formula is now available in a Plexiglass filter that can be added or removed underwater.

www.magic-filters.com