

Cenotes Indonesian style

by Nicholas Kouvaras

It is 3:00 o'clock in the morning in Jakarta and a group of divers with a lot of gear are waiting to check in for a flight to Balikpapan. From there a smaller plane would take them to Berau and from there with a speed boat go down the river and finally to Maratua. One of the hidden gems of Indonesia's archipelago. The purpose of the trip is to dive in a cave/sinkhole/lake/cenote.

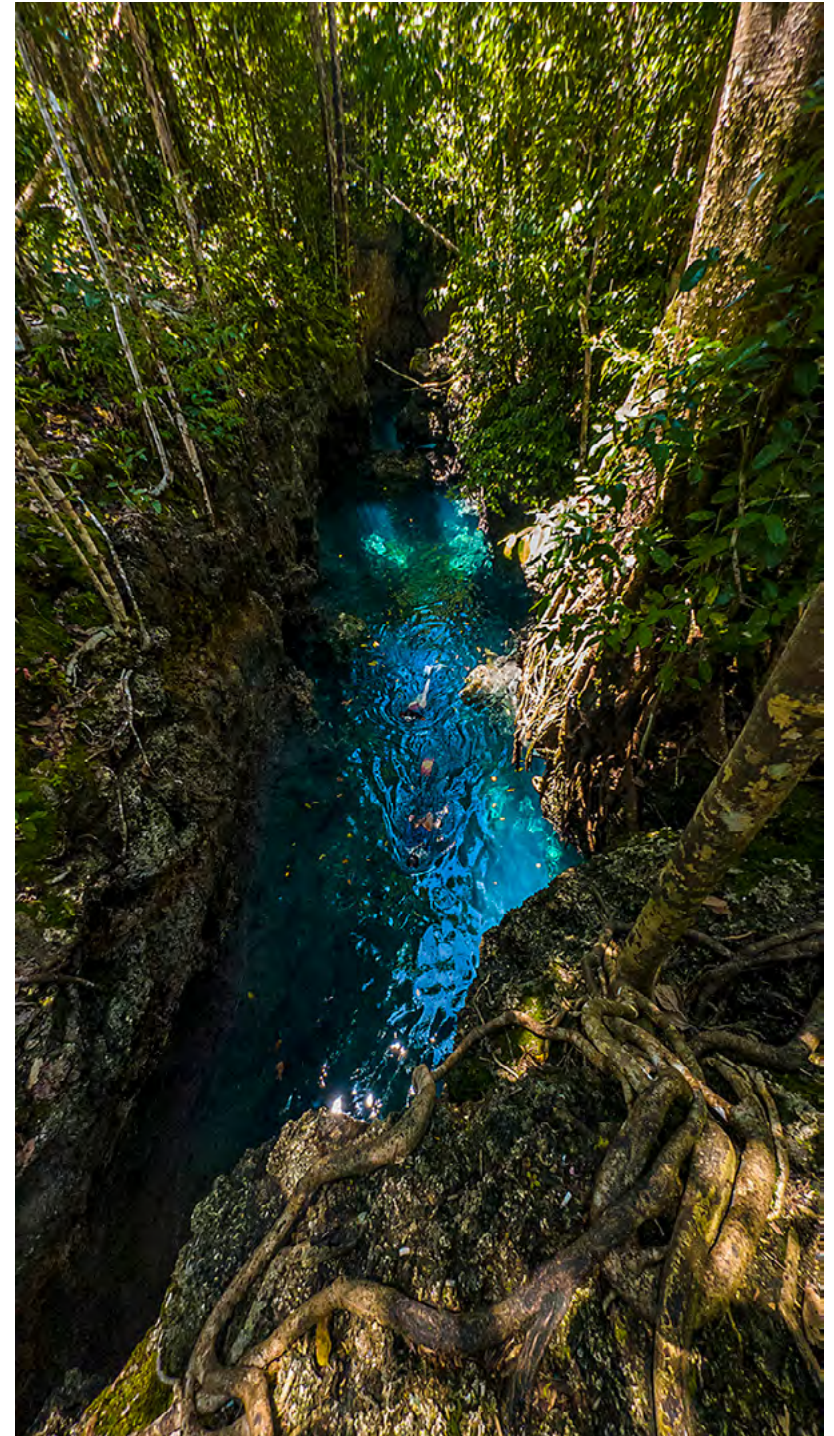
Halo Tabung or Haji Mangku Cave is a hidden gem on Maratua island. Inside the forest but close to the Ocean it is the most accessible from a series of similar flooded caves on this Karstic island. According to the locals it has some mystical history and it is considered a sacred and spiritual place. It is definitely magical, if you ask me. Maratua island is located in the East Kalimantan region and apart from the caves it offers an amazing diversity of dive sites. Schooling barracuda, thresher sharks, great walls with pristine corals and amazing volume of life. In the close by islands, there is a whale shark spot, a giant manta cleaning station, an inland lake with stingless jelly fishes and many more.

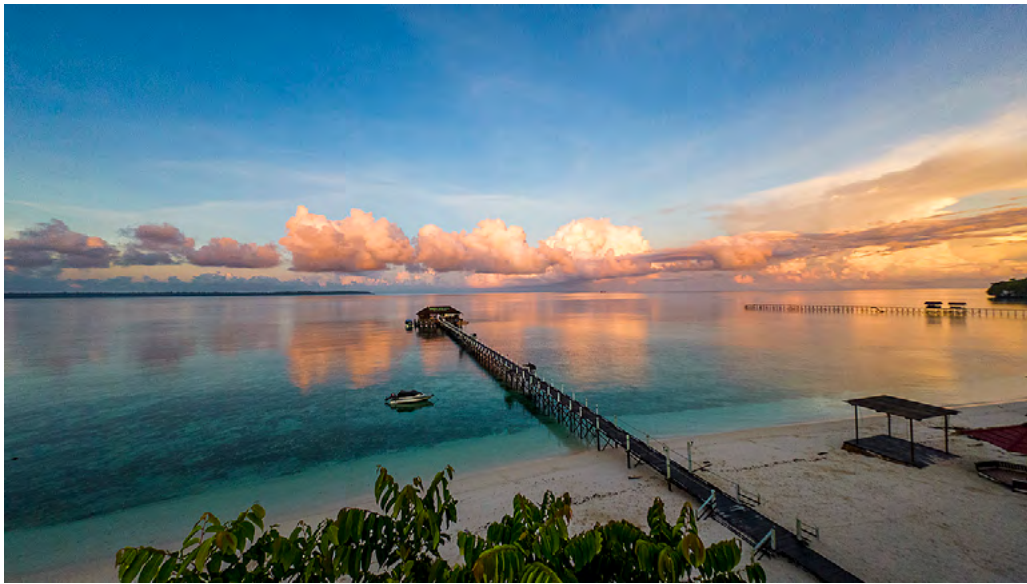
It was the second time that we visited the area and the cave. Both



Very like a superhero. 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/2.5, 1/125 sec, ISO800, P Mode.

The Cave from Above. DJI Action 2 f/2.8, 1/100 sec, ISO320.





Morning view from the Green Nirvana Resort. DJI Action 2 f/2.8, 1/100 sec , ISO190.

The first chamber, small and dark but so unique. 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/1.8, 1/60 sec , ISO1600, P Mode

times with students from freediving schools. This time around we were lucky to get the opportunity to dive the cave just with the team before the students arrived. The clear waters and the colours of the rock formations combined with the rays of light filtering through the trees create an amazing canvas for the underwater photographer.

We were also lucky on this trip to have really good divers with us that were happy to pose and suffer following the directions of the photographers.

The cave consists of three

chambers. All chambers are different and unique in the way the light reaches the water producing completely different results. This makes the cave even more interesting for the UW photographer. The deepest part of the cave is around 16 metres in the middle of the second chamber. There is also a swim through between the 2nd and 3rd chamber. The first chamber is small but the light comes from a small window and creates very beautiful rays.

It is less than 5 minutes to trek from the pier to the cave. Then you just go down the steps to enter the



first chamber. At low tide you can just swim to the next chamber. At high tide you need to make a small dive, it is just a couple of metres. For the third chamber you can swim at the surface or go down to 6-7 metres and swim though. The water temperature is 26 degrees and there is a layer of fresh water for the first 5 or 6 metres. At the bottom of the cave there are some logs that create an otherworldly effect.

My favourite is the first chamber with the wooden steps and the minimal light. The pictures there look so unique.

I was using my freediving friendly Olympus OM-D E-M5 mark III with the 8mm f/1.8 Fisheye Lens behind a 4.33" dome port in a Nauticam housing. There was one more photographer with the Canon EF 8-15mm f/4L Fisheye lens and 2 more with rectilinear lenses. The waters are very clear so I didn't notice any benefit from using the fisheye. Some divers in our group tried using strobes and lights but it was hard to contain the light between the narrow walls. The depth is very small and natural light worked best in the end. A very useful tip is to move slowly and avoid touching the walls to keep the waters clear. If a lot of people are in the water and they are not careful the visibility will degrade very fast.

For the next dive of the day we would go to the channel or big fish



Neysa can't hide her excitement. 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, 1/400 sec, ISO800, A Mode



Last picture. Neysa put her tail and dove blindly, No mask no goggles and yet she was exactly at the right spot. She is amazing. 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/2.5, 1/125 sec , ISO2000, P Mode

channel as the locals call it. When we arrived our hosts prepared a drone and used it to locate a big school of Barracudas. They brought the boat close and we dived. I have to admit that I have never seen such a big school of fish.

The diving was not easy. You had to swim constantly to keep up with the school. It was kind of funny watching the barracudas casually swimming followed by a bunch of scuba divers and freedivers with occasional flashes shooting every now and then. A grey reef shark checked us out for a moment and some Giant trevally also joined the festivities for a while. Every few minutes the barracuda would create a vortex and if you were lucky to be close enough you could swim inside it. Truly a magical moment and an amazing first day of a diving trip.

Here the fisheye lens made a big difference especially when I wanted to shoot the divers with the barracuda in the background. Being able to get closer, the barracuda looked a lot more sharp.

We stayed at the Green Nirvana resort on Maratua island that offered us apart from the accommodations

and the great food, the boat and the insights for all the dive spots. It helps a lot when the owner of the resort is a passionate diver and UW photographer.

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