

Macro Magic at Alam Batu

by David Fleetham and Jennifer Ross

Bali, Indonesia, is no stranger to the diving world, but for underwater photographers, Tulamben is a macro-rich paradise that deserves more than a cursory glance. My partner Jennifer Ross and I recently spent two weeks at Alam Batu Beach Resort, located on the northeast coast of the island. For fourteen days, we dove four times daily, one of those being a night dive each evening.

Alam Batu sits on a rugged stretch of coast framed by black volcanic sand beaches, lava rock, and dense jungle. Above water, the backdrop of Mount Agung looms large. Below, the reefscape is a patchwork of coral gardens, black sand valleys, and vertical walls teeming with rare and bizarre marine life. The resort's dive site menu includes names like Dreamland, Adventure, Baywatch, and the ever-iconic Liberty Wreck, alongside sites with local names such as Ketut, Jukung, Batu Niti, and Pasir Ilmuh. You never had to repeat a dive unless you requested it—and we did just that on more than one occasion.

Each morning started in the open-air restaurant with a cup of coffee and a spectacular sunrise

over the Bali Sea. The dive team had our gear all set up for us to inspect and analyze our nitrox. As we pull on wetsuits the gear and our cameras are carried to the boat and we grab our mask and fins and follow. Within minutes, we were underway to sites that were just five to fifteen minutes away. The dives were private affairs, each group had their own guide and boat drop, so that you rarely saw another diver underwater.

Dive guides at Alam Batu are equal parts safety officers and treasure hunters. Our guide for the entire two weeks, Nengah, knew the reef like his living room, and his ability to spot camouflaged critters bordered on supernatural. Every one-hour dive flew by in a flurry of macro subjects. No sooner had you framed one than our guide was waving us over to the next gem.

Our sightings read like a who's who of macro treasures: yawning paddle-flap scorpionfish (*Rhinopias eschmeyer*), mimic octopus, *Thaumoctopus mimicus*, and many fish and crustaceans guarding or holding egg masses. We photographed elusive subjects like the Zanzibar whip coral shrimp (*Dasycaris*



*A striking lionfish, *Pterois volitans*, glides gracefully beside a colony of brightly colored alcyonarian soft coral.*

Canon EOS R5 mirrorless in an Ikelite dry-lock housing with a Canon 8-15mm at 15mm, 1/100 sec, F11, ISO 640, with two very powerful Ikelite 230 strobes set on TTL.



*This leaf scorpionfish, *Taenianotus triacanthus*, an ambush predator, is perched on the tip of the coral in hopes one of the fish in the background will approach close enough for it to strike. Canon EOS R5 mirrorless in an Ikelite dry-lock housing with a Canon RF 100mm macro lens, 1/160 sec, F32, ISO 100, with two very powerful Ikelite 230 strobes set on TTL.*

zanzibarica), leopard crinoid shrimp (*Laomenes pardus*), and the intricately adorned spiny tiger shrimp (*Phyllognathia ceratophthalma*). On one dive, a pygmy seahorse (*Hippocampus bargibanti*) nearly escaped our notice until our guide pointed it out, smaller than a grain of rice, camouflaged to perfection on its gorgonian host.

Between dives, the resort hums with a quiet

energy. We peel out of our wetsuits and hang them at our numbered gear station. Rinse tanks are clearly labeled: one for cameras only, and others for regulators, another for dive gear and a fourth with a mild detergent for wetsuits. The camera rooms are equipped with power strips and workspaces to prep for the next dive and your guide will even dry your setup with compressed air and place it at



*A yellow thorny seahorse, *Hippocampus histrix*. Known for their bony armor and prehensile tails, thorny seahorses thrive in the Indo-Pacific's diverse reef environments. Canon EOS R5 mirrorless in an Ikelite dry-lock housing with a Canon RF 100mm macro lens, 1/160 sec, F32, ISO 100, with two very powerful Ikelite 230 strobes set on TTL.*



*The coral-encrusted Liberty Wreck in Tulamben, Bali, Indonesia, where vibrant soft coral trees, *Dendronephthya* sp., drape from a collapsed section of the ship. The site is a magnet for macro and wide-angle photographers alike, offering rich marine biodiversity and stunning coral growth set against black sand and steel skeletons. Canon EOS R5 mirrorless in an Ikelite dry-lock housing with a Canon 8-15mm at 15mm, 1/100 sec, F11, ISO 640, with two very powerful Ikelite 230 strobes set on TTL.*

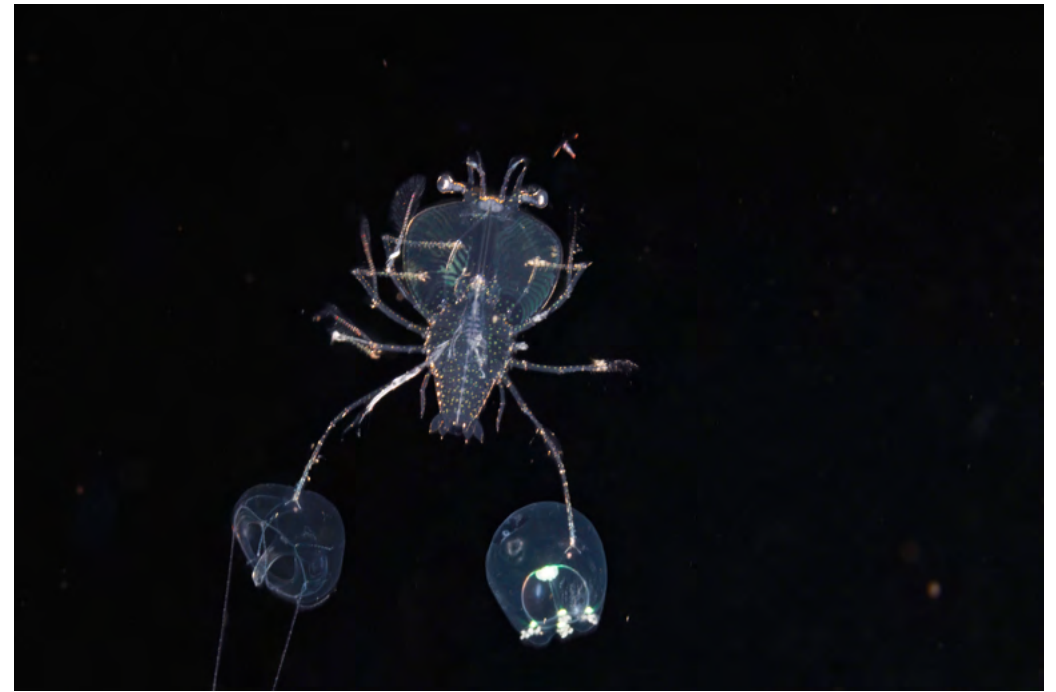
your station. Breakfasts included fruit, warm bread, and made-to-order eggs that fuelled our long dive days. After a thorough camera check, we were back in our wetsuits and off again.

The Liberty Wreck is the only site where we consistently saw other divers. Changes were noticeable since our last visit; a section of the wreck had collapsed, but coral growth remained healthy, and the

reef seemed even more vibrant.

Trees of soft coral caught the current, while reef fish sought shelter in every crevice. Cleaner shrimp danced on the faces of coral groupers (*Cephalopholis miniata*), and schools of anthias painted the water with color.

Each night brought its own magic. Our dusk dives often began with broadclub cuttlefish (*Sepia latimanus*) who, on two occasions,



This image was captured a half mile offshore on a blackwater night dive with the bottom 1500+ feet below. The crab has captured two jellyfish which it will use as protection from predators. The body of the crab is less than one inch in length in this larval stage. Canon EOS R5 mirrorless in an Ikelite dry-lock housing with a Canon RF 50mm macro lens, 1/160 sec, F22, ISO 100, with two very powerful Ikelite 230 strobes set on TTL.

were working on mating rituals. The venomous demon stinger or spiny devilfish, *Inimicus didactylus*, well deserving of its impressively fearsome names, were found almost every night along with bobtail squid, and one unforgettable evening where dozens of cartwheeling larval mantis shrimp spiraled in our lights.

We encountered skeleton shrimp (*Caprella* sp.) so small they could

only be noticed in post-dive reviews, and ghostgobies guarding their eggs on tunicates. Harlequin shrimp (*Hymenocera elegans*) feeding on sea star arms, and the tiny but mighty pom-pom crab (*Lybia tessellata*) paraded around with anemones in each claw. Even the eerie, prehistoric stonefish (*Synanceia verrucosa*) made appearances, nestled in the sand and waiting.



The body of the crab is less than one inch in length in this larval stage. Canon EOS R5 mirrorless in an Ikelite dry-lock housing with a Canon RF 50mm macro lens, 1/160 sec, F22, ISO 100, with two very powerful Ikelite 230 strobes set on TTL.

dreams of those perfect conditions—warm water, minimal currents, excellent visibility, and a never-ending parade of subjects. Alam Batu delivered all that and more. The rule was: if your hair is wet, it's time to eat; if it's dry, it's time to dive.

We left with thousands of images, new friends, and deep gratitude for the staff, guides, and incredible biodiversity of Bali's northeast coast. The photographic opportunities were endless: a harlequin ghost pipefish (*Solenostomus paradoxus*) hovering near soft coral, a thresher shark appearing for a split second on a deeper dive, or a juvenile orbicular batfish (*Platax orbicularis*) mimicking a drifting leaf.

To any underwater photographer considering a trip to Bali: dive deep, end shallow, and bring your laptop or extra memory cards. Alam Batu isn't just a resort—it's a macro photographer's muse.

David Fleetham
www.davidfleetham.com

The Importance of Focus

By Jennifer Ross

Earlier this May, my partner David Fleetham and I spent two unforgettable weeks diving in Tulamben on the island of Bali in Indonesia. As underwater photographers, we were eager to explore the famed muck diving sites around the Alam Batu Beach Bungalow Resort. We arrived on May 6th and were immediately impressed by the resort's peaceful welcoming atmosphere. The lush grounds, infinity

pool, fully equipped spa, stone-crafted outdoor showers, oceanfront villas, and incredibly warm, professional staff were a delight to the senses.

The diving kicked off strong with four dives on May 7th - and the macro life was nothing short of spectacular. From rhinopias scorpionfish to pygmy seahorses and other fascinating critters, this region of Bali delivered everything a muck diver dreams of photographing.

Donald Duck Shrimp with eggs. Canon EOS R7 mirrorless in an Ikelite dry-lock housing with a Canon RF 100mm macro lens, 1/125 sec, F20, ISO 400, with two Ikelite 161 strobes set on TTL.



Night diving here blurs into blackwater territory. On the two designated blackwater nights, we drifted over 1500 feet of water. It was here we spotted a larval crab wielding jellyfish like shields, larval flying fish gliding with delicate fin extensions and jellyfish, including box jellies, so we were pleased to be wearing full 3mm suits as well as a hood. Evenings ended with warm showers under the stars and delicious dinners served under bamboo poles topped with glowing tubular lanterns. The set menu changed nightly, each meal outdoing the last.

Every underwater photographer



OM Systems TG7, OM housing, 100th sec @ F14. 500 ISO. Built in flash and external video light.

But then... disaster struck.

On the first dive of the second day, I accidentally flooded my new Canon R7 mirrorless camera housing. A devastating mistake caused by a lapse in focus during setup. It didn't matter how many other empathetic photographers tried to console me with comments like, "eventually it happens to the best of us..." I was inconsolable. To say that this was inevitable was analogous to saying "crashing" was part of flying an airplane.

No!

That moment felt like the end of my trip. I was gutted—unable to eat, dive, or think straight. For any underwater photographer, losing a camera on location has to be a worst-case scenario, and in that moment, I was shattered.

But the story didn't end there. Thanks to the incredibly supportive team at Alam Batu, especially our dive concierge Susan, I was able to purchase an Olympus TG-7 locally - a simple, reliable, and very



OM Systems TG7, 100th sec @ F14. 500 ISO. Built in flash and external video light.

capable camera for capturing great macro shots. I paired it with my GoPro setup equipped with a Backscatter close-focus wide-angle lens, and by day four, I was back in the water. With the sharp eye of our guide Nengah (who could honestly find any critter we asked for, as if they were his pets), I was diving again! Over the next two weeks we had some spectacular encounters—especially at night. Octopus, sea snakes, nudibranchs of every color, snake eels, cuttlefish, and even a tiny pygmy squid that danced in the light on our final night.

Four dives per day builds up a healthy appetite and the food at Alam Batu was exceptional. They offer a varied menu featuring healthy and delicious selections that appeal to a wide variety of tastes. The other guests, who came and went from all over



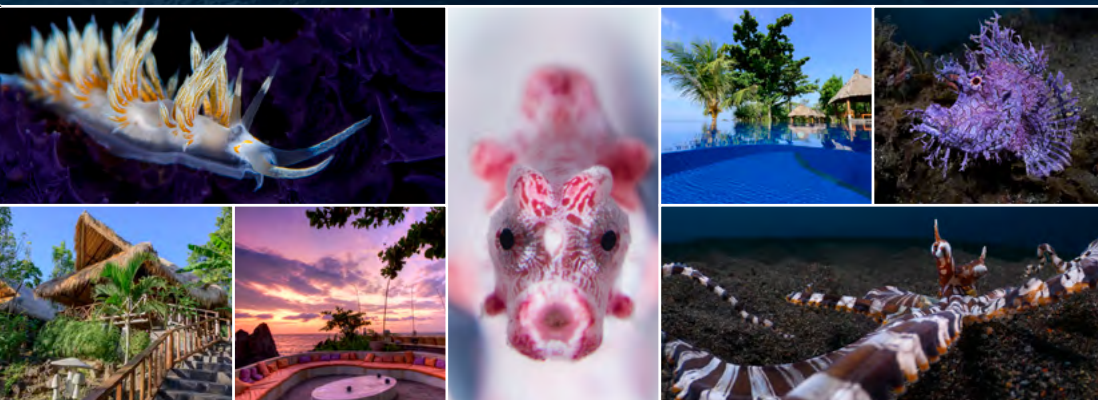
OM Systems TG7, 100th sec @ F14. 500 ISO. Built in flash and external video light.

the world, were a joy to meet too—each with their own stories, and all understanding the heartbreak of a flooded rig.

This trip turned into one of the most meaningful diving experiences of our lives. Yes, there was a hard lesson learned about the importance of focus when working with professional camera gear. But more than that, it reinforced how strong our partnership is, and how every challenge underwater can lead to growth, gratitude, and creative reinvention.

We can't recommend Alam Batu highly enough—for its outstanding dive staff, comfort, and the sheer richness of life in its surrounding waters. For any underwater photographer, especially those drawn to the thrill of muck diving, this is a destination that will not disappoint.

Jennifer Ross
Facebook
Instagram

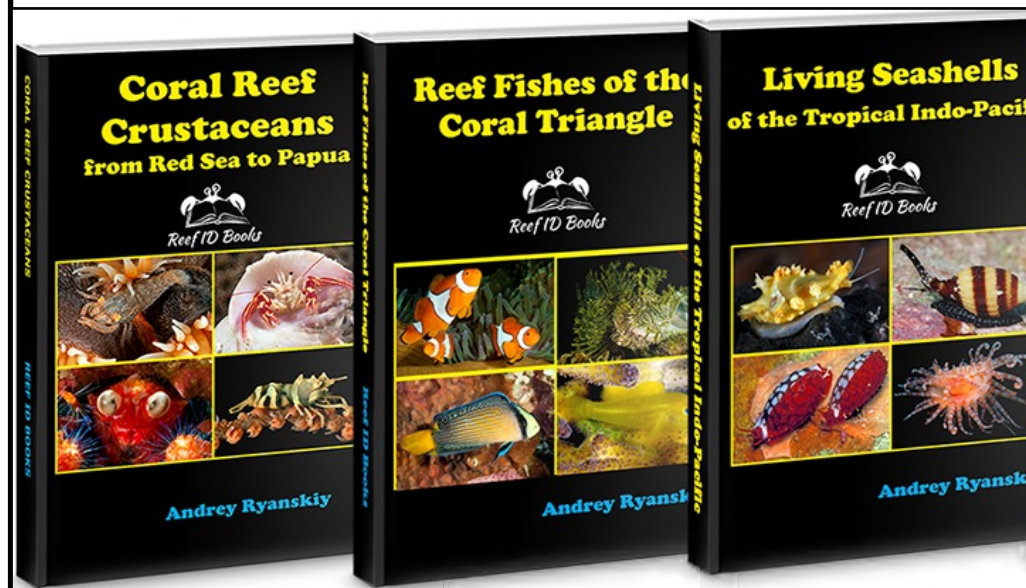


ALAM BATU BEACH BUNGLAOW RESORT | BALI | INDONESIA

- DIVE GUIDES EXPERIENCED IN WORKING WITH PHOTOGRAPHERS
- LARGE CAMERA ROOM SUITABLE FOR PHOTO GROUPS
- BOAT AND SHORE DIVING WITH NITROX AVAILABLE
- ALL-INCLUSIVE DIVE, SPA & TOUR PACKAGES

INFO@ALAM-BATU.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