

Bali -A photographers guide

by Demelza Postlethwaite



Far from being a rather stale tropical idyll, Bali boasts every conceivable form of marine life in its surrounding waters. For the the underwater photographer it offers walls, drifts, wrecks, reefs and muck dives. The subject diversity in these waters equals those found in other less accessible locations and where else can you peel off your wetsuit, flop onto a sun lounger and get a post dive massage for the same price as a beer at home.

Undoubtedly, during the past year, Bali has fallen victim to an image problem. However, take one look at a glossy coffee table book of underwater photos and nine times out of ten it will include several shots taken in Bali. Little wonder then that top underwater photographers have continued to make their annual

pilgrimage here.

The best way to experience Bali's variety is via a land based round island safari visiting all the top locations.

Pandangbai

This is a one and a half hour drive from the tourist centre of Kuta/Denpasar. A very close site Blue Lagoon is relatively shallow, sloping down to 22m, making it a perfect site to check out your gear after a long journey. The large sandy incline is not beautiful in itself but there are lots of interesting creatures here. A coral outcrop at 17m shelters glass fish kept company by blue ribbon eels, various colours of leaf scorpion fish, frogfish and the occasional Rhinopius. It's a great spot for a

Nikon F90, Subal housing, 20mm lens, 2 xSea & Sea YS120, Manual Full, 1/60th @ F11. Fuji Provia F100.

60 mm macro lens or some close up wide angle. Nudibranchs trawl round on the sand and wobbegong sharks sometimes lurk under coral at the eastern end of this tiny bay. Everyone, from novice diver to hardened professional photographer, seems to enjoy it and it's worth repeating.

The small rocky island of Gili Biaha is crescent shaped and in places the wall resembles a huge pile of six foot square blocks of volcanic basalt poured into the water. The topography underwater is quite unique as these rugged blocks have attracted a tapestry of vivid soft

corals. Between the boulders live octopus, leaf scorpion fish, sea snakes, several frog fish and mantis shrimp. Purple Nembrotha nudibranchs are common at this site despite the hefty surge felt as deep as 25m. There is a large shallow cave at about 12m which is home to a couple of sharks during the day. This dive is also well suited to a 60 mm lens while a wide angle set up will allow you to shoot the sharks and capture the topography.

Gili Mimpang is located at the base of three tiny rock islands. The dive begins in a sandy area; home to cuttlefish, sea pens and some very cross Titan triggerfish when we visited. As you reach the base of the rock the current will probably pick up and you will drift the rest of your dive among a dense shoal of anthias, sweetlips, groupers - the list is endless and the reef is stunning. As the current gets quicker you start flying between coral boulders and virtually bumping into white tip reef sharks.

This is primarily a wide angle dive although the speed of the current will dictate if you have much time to use it and as with so many of Bali's sites you'd be mad not to have a macro capability here too.

Nusa Penida

The largest of three islands off the south east coast of Bali accessible from Padangbai by boat. SD and Ped are both wall dives which are prone to some degree of current. As with just about any wall dive in Bali you can expect a wide variety of reef fish although the coral is disappointing. The main reason for diving here is probably not for the reef itself but rather for the chance encounter with pelagics. With tuna, barracuda, black and white tip sharks to look out for as you drift along you will want a wide angle lens especially if diving during the August to October period when these sites experience Mola mola, or 'sunfish' sightings.

Located between Nusa Penida and the neighbouring island of Ceningan in what is effectively a channel, Toyapakeh is stunning. Both hard and soft corals attract heaps of fish and there are large patches of vivid green soft coral.

Groupers hang under dramatic table corals and everything has a healthy and bountiful look making it perfect for wide angle. During many dives here the reason for this flourishing scenery becomes evident as the current has a habit of picking up dramatically. On these occasions there's little point in trying to shoot anything. Not one for



Nikon F90, Subal housing, 60mm lens, Inon Ringflash, TTL 1/80th @ F11. Fuji Velvia.

the less than well experienced.

Manta point is one spot on Nusa Penida which experiences current infrequently. However, it is replaced by some hefty swell and best dived early in the day. There is no coral here - it is a sheer limestone wall with a sandy bottom which can reduce visibility to 10-15 metres. In season (April-May) you stand a good chance of the opportunity to shoot mantas feeding and even out of season there are reports of up to 50 on a single dive. If you are unlucky then there is absolutely nothing to see here apart from nudibranchs which are of no consolation when you're holding a fish eye or 20 mm lens set up. Still, 50 mantas is too tempting a thought not to want to give it a shot.

Amed and Jemeluk

Amed is a great place to stay, eat and dive from. Just in front of Cafe Garam the black sand yields countless seahorses, weedy file fish and the cutest pink frog fish I've ever seen. However it is not a site to do following rain and there's only sea



Nikon F90, Subal housing, 105mm lens, Sea & Sea YS120, TTL 1/60th @ F32. Fuji Velvia.

pens, with commensal porcelain crabs, between the luckier finds. The 60 mm lens and ring flash were perfect for reducing the scatter from all that fine sand.

A small local boat or 'jukung' is just big enough for a couple of sets of gear and will take you across the bay to Jemeluk. There are two sites here, one a wall well suited to close up wide angle and the other an artificial reef made up of a collection of concrete blocks. The blocks are pretty dull but there are a couple of sea fans hosting the pink pygmy seahorse. These are best photographed with a 105 mm lens with a +4 dioptre.

Tulamben

The fish photographers' paradise an hour north east of Padangbai and all the accommodation here is well used to photographers and their needs. The locals will not bat an eyelid at a housed F5 with two monster Subtronic strobes because they have seen it all before. Lying on a steep slope just a few feet from the shore The Liberty is one of the best wreck dives in the world not least because of the



Nikon F90, Subal housing, 105mm lens, Inon Ringflash, TTL 1/100th @ F16. Fuji Velvia.

easy access.

Although the Liberty was wrecked in 1942 she was not in the water until 1963 when a volcanic eruption toppled her from her position on the beach here. In less than 40 years she has become 100 metres of densely encrusted coral joy, supporting such a wide variety of marine life as to fill volumes of ID books. Plan to dive it several times with wide angle early in the day and macro later. The stern of the vessel lies in a few metres of water while the bow, complete with bow gun, lies in about 30 metres. It is not uncommon to find the newly named Denise's pygmy seahorse here so make a dive with super macro but watch your deco.

The hull of the wreck is somewhat broken up allowing for some great structural shots. Everything from frog fish to whale sharks can be encountered on a dive here. The prolific fish life is easy to shoot, being well used to divers and cameras, and the twisting silver column of a thousand resident jacks makes it worth diving here again and again for some classic sunburst and



Nikon F90, Subal housing, 60mm lens, Inon Ringflash, TTL 1/80th @ F32. Fuji Velvia.

circling fish shots. This is deservedly Bali's most popular dive site so to avoid the crowds, and all the associated bubbles, dive it as early as possible. This way you can work in relative solitude while later in the day you'll find yourself sharing it with everyone from discover scuba divers to the world's top underwater photographers.

Unfortunately the Coral Wall at the west of the bay was heavily silted early this year following a flood. There are already signs of recovery and soon the wall, pitted with interesting nooks and crannies, will be worth visiting again. A site famous for the variety of fish which can be found and have been photographed here together with some particularly large sea fans.

In the centre of the bay and probably just a few steps from your hotel room this shallow House Reef and Black Sand River also fell victim to the silt.

Black tip shark cruise the slope while muck diving fans will find a variety of bizarre nudibranchs and other macro subjects particularly in the feathery crinoids. Night dives will reveal plenty of subject matter including snake eels and weird shrimps. Forget your wide angle lens on these sites and stick to extreme macro with a 105 mm lens. Proving that anything is possible in Tulamben, one afternoon we sat down to watch the sun set with a beer and watched a mother and baby whale pass just beyond the house reef while dolphins are frequent visitors in the morning and late afternoon.

Menjangan and Secret Bay

The north west tip of Bali. A three hour drive on from Tulamben and worth the journey. Pos 2 is a classic Indonesian wall dive with the added splendour of copious large sea fans in shades

of yellow, orange, red and pink. It's best to travel with the reef on your left which shouldn't be a problem as there is very little if any current here giving you plenty of time to frame those wide angle diver and sea fan shots you'd been after so a willing buddy to act as model would help. Once again there is also plenty of macro life here too. A close look into the crinoids, perched on the tips of the gorgonians, will reveal squat lobsters and crinoid cling fish while little sparkling gobies dart over sponges. All the fish groups are well represented here particularly butterfly fish which aggregate slightly off the wall alongside unicorn fish and are often joined by young inquisitive bat fish. It's a dilemma whether to make your second dive with macro or simply do wide angle all over again!

The attractive little Anker Wreck in about 35 metres which will keep twisted metal junkies sated. It works well as a morning dive when the sun is in the correct position and you can shoot up with the reef and divers above. The shallower wall is equally superb where there are plenty of barrel sponges and some excellent coral. This site also experiences great viz so once again it is the ideal site for wide angle photography but, that said, it is worth doing again with a 60 mm or 105 mm macro lens as there is plenty of macro here.

Not actually a single dive site but more of a whole shallow area, Secret Bay is best dived at high tide. During two days here I had the pleasure of photographing sea horses, flying gurnards, sea moths, frog fish, ornate ghost pipe fish and countless bizarre nudibranchs. The diving is shallow and



therefore it is not unusual to spend two or more hours submerged in search of your critter quarry. Film is the limiting factor. One photographer spent the entire day underwater with his assistant

Nikon F90, Subal housing, 20mm lens, Sea & Sea YS120 and YS90, TTL 1/60th @ F8. Fuji Provia F100.

closely guarding the lair of a mimic octopus. Needless to say you will primarily want to work with a 60 mm lens but you can always buoy your special subject, change lens and drop back in.

Serious photographers should plan at least two weeks for their round Bali safari. Pack plenty of Velvia but do not overlook the wide angle shots on offer here. It's easy to go macro mad! If you thought Bali was plagued by package holiday makers and blemished with neon signs then you haven't been diving at the right sites. Throughout the island the

strongly felt religious beliefs of the Balinese have produced a landscape dotted with temples, and the scented air together with floral offerings create an indivisible sense of celebration and inner peace. The perfect atmosphere for taking some great photos.

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