

Minahasa Lagoon, Manado

with Peter Rowlands

“Would you like your baggage checked all the way through to Manado, Sir?” the attractive Singapore Airlines check-in lady asked. This was to be the start of a most relaxing week to assess a new dive resort at Minahasa Lagoon near Manado for a week in early December 2003.

No need to reclaim baggage at Singapore, cart it to and from the hotel and then have to queue up again for the next day flight to Manado. I was checked right through. Luxury.

Actually my trip really started from London Heathrow departure Gate 37.

Has anyone ever flown from Gate 1? Is there a Gate 1? Or is Gate 37 just a cunning ploy to save the airline's fuel bill by making you walk most of the way to Manado?

Anyway after a 12 hour flight I overnighted in Singapore in the comfortable Golden Landmark hotel located far too conveniently near a shopping mall specialising in cameras and electronic goodies. I had to sow my wallet pocket up to avoid temptation but, in truth, the prices were not that amazing but the sheer spectacle of 5 floors of hustle and bustle was very impressive.

After a short 2 hour flight the next morning, during which the captain assured us that we had crossed the equator three times, I was met at Manado airport by the Minahasa Lagoon (I'm going to call it ML from now on) courtesy minibus.

Manado drivers wouldn't last 5 minutes in London. They would surely be victims of a road rage attack within the first mile. Their regular tooting of the horn and tailgating would have resulted in a good thumping back home but it seems that this is the norm in this neck of the woods and, amazingly enough, it works well because everyone seems to know what the rules are.

Overtaking is something which can be done with oncoming traffic clearly in full view because, at the last minute and with no animosity whatsoever, the vehicle being overtaken and the oncoming one, about to hit us head on, just move slightly to the left and right and we go through a narrow gap between them. A quick toot of the horn says thank you and we continue on to tailgate the next vehicle in front of us.

Fortunately the kind ML people had provided a cooler box complete with cold water and more



Being the only guest I had no trouble booking a sunlounger. I sat on a different one each day in case they got jealous. The veranda deck looks out over the sea to Bunaken Island Marine Reserve.

importantly deliciously cold towels which I used to mop my sweating brow and cover my eyes at the same time. I must stress that my brow was sweating due to the tropical heat which takes a day or two to get used to rather than the driving antics. You soon get used to it, the antics, that is..

I was either reassured or hoodwinked by the driver that road accidents are rare in Manado and we soon approached the impressive entrance to the ML Dive & Tours Club. It is less than an hour's drive from Manado airport and overlooks

the northern shore towards Bunaken Island Marine Reserve.

All of a sudden the flights, the overnight in Singapore and the entertaining minibus ride melted away as my baggage was whisked away and taken to my comfortable 'cottage' of which there are 15. I was greeted by Danny, the Resort Director and Antonio, the Dive Director and shown to my new home for the week.

All 15 cottages are identical with a large double bed and a twinbunk bed in a separate internally partitioned room so 4 could sleep



*(Far left) The house reef outside the harbour are very healthy. 12-24mm lens.
(Left) A curious mantis shrimp shot with a 28-70mm lens.*

quite comfortably. Not all cottages have direct seafront access but mine did and the spacious veranda overlooked the soothing, lapping sea. The bathroom was actually enchanting. It was tastefully decorated and open to the air at the end near the shower. There was also a small bed of tropical plants here which gave me a feeling of being in the jungle whenever I had a shower. Lovely.

The rooms have a limited number of two pin round plugs for 240v electricity so I would suggest bringing an extension lead to cater for the needs of an underwater photographers' battery chargers, laptop power supplies and curling

tongs (please note, girls, a hairdrier is provided).

I forgot to mention that the walk from the main entrance to the cottages is via a rope bridge. Now when you're 8 hours jetlagged I'm not sure this is a good idea for it is a motion which takes some getting used to but fortunately I was on my own and couldn't create the resonance that a group walking in time would generate. Groups, please remember to stagger your steps over these bridges to avoid being thrown off the bridge at this early stage of your trip.

ML has a most stylish central bar and dining room area overlooking an oval

freshwater pool and out to the open sea towards Bunaken Island Marine Reserve. In the evenings it was most pleasant to sit on a lounge and down a cold beer whilst watching the sun go down. Very relaxing.

Right now. Down to work. I was here as a guest of ML to sample the delights of their newly built development. Next morning after an excellent buffet breakfast I met Ronnie and Ramon, the two dive guides, on one of their three dive boats. They are based on the Maldivian dhoni style (the boats, not Ronnie and Ramon) with benches either side holding 12 litre steel tanks and space underneath for your personal dive crate.

Overhead shelving was useful for dry items.

Access to the water is from two central, low sided open sections and re-entry is via a traditional dive ladder in which I managed to expose a design flaw as I insisted in being macho and climbing out with my cylinder and weightbelt still on. It is true the design of the ladder was somewhat lightweight but it is also true that it's easier to hand up your weightbelt and cylinder up first and then skip up the ladder.

Although it is possible to have really good shore diving right in front of ML, the reality is that it is just so much easier to go by boat even if it is just a hundred

yards. You can change on board, have your camera toolkit to hand and plenty of clean fresh towels to dry yourself. It's a no brainer.

And so to the diving. Right in front of ML is what I would describe as above average muck diving. It's not just sand and rubble. There are outcrops of reefs and a variety of mini landscapes. In this area we found enough subjects to keep me happy for many a while. Mantis shrimp, leaf fish, ribbon eels both blue and black and, on one night dive, no less than six stonefish (three different species). We also saw a small frogfish on one night dive but never found him again and we were hoping to bump into his



The wall dive at Bunaken was absolutely stunning and we drifted over pristine coral for nearly an hour. Nikon D100, Subal housing, 12-24mm @ 12. Aperture priority available light @ F8. Blenny shot with 105mm macro 1/180th F22 manual exposure Inon Z220 flashgun



mum and dad at some stage but no luck there. A dark ghost pipefish was also the highlight of one dive.

Having sampled a couple of days' diving I casually mentioned to Danny and Antonio that they had chosen the location of ML very wisely next to such a productive house reef. I was amazed to hear them say that they had not dived the area before deciding on a location for ML. All I can say is that they struck it lucky without realising it. They have developed ML right in front of an excellent diving area.

This truth was confirmed the next day as we ventured just on the other side of the boat mooring breakwater. In complete contrast to the muck reef I was diving on a very healthy coral reef which sloped gently down to about 10 metres to meet a clean sandy seabed. Unfortunately the sun was not bright enough to make the reef sparkle (December, even in these strange climatic times, is considered the rainy season) but what I saw was very impressive and I was sure I would discover a striated frogfish or two sooner

or later. In truth I never did but this area is so undived that I'm sure that it is only a matter of time, as more keen eyes dive the area, that more exotic creatures will be discovered.

After three days of thoroughly absorbing diving and underwater photography around ML we made a trip to Bunaken Island Marine Reserve. This is a one hour trip boat away and is well worth it. I had one of the best wall drift dives I have ever had gliding past pristine, large, healthy coral, a myriad of fish life and the occasional large grouper which to me indicate an undisturbed reef. This sheer, uninterrupted vertical reef dive lasted a leisurely hour although I understand it can take considerably less time as tidal flows do fluctuate considerably.

After a sensible surface interval we did a shallow reef dive and I was amazed by the healthy coral landscapes and clear water. The temperature didn't vary much from 29° wherever we were which meant for a comfortable dive skin and minimal weights. At no time



(Left) We saw plenty of ribbon eels separately but these two were sharing accommodation. 28-70mm lens (Centre) The dancing shrimps were a challenge for the 105mm lens. F22 was needed to get depth of field. (Top) A cooperative ghost pipefish. 28-70mm lens.

did I shiver on any dive to whatever depth.

We discussed a third dive at Bunaken but to be quite honest I was keen to get back to ML and look for more creatures. It may seem strange but I preferred simplicity of the muck and reef diving at ML. That's no reflection on the splendour of Bunaken just an indication about me.

Believe it or not, it's actually quite hard to assess a new dive resort when you are the only guest there but that's what I was. You can only gauge the true performance of the staff and management when they've got people to serve. How they cope in the kitchen, how the dive boat picks up multiple underwater photographers who got separated by a hundred yards whilst they surfaced and how they treat underwater

photographers in general.

From my point of view, I was treated like royalty. "Mr Peter" this, "Mr Peter" that. I loved it. My dive bag was carried down to the boat on the first day and then, on the last day, brought back, rinsed and dried. I've never had that before. I got the impression that if I'd asked them to carry me to and from the boat I would have been hoisted on a strong back immediately. However I must stress that this is just my impression and there is certainly no mention of this service in the brochure.

ML is a brand new facility and as such is feeling its way in providing diving. The equipment they have is comprehensive and their staff are friendly and knowledgeable. However I think they will have to adapt slightly in some areas if they are

to attract underwater photographers who will take the photos which will promote future business.

The first adaption is one which I fully accept is unreasonable but dives are limited to 60 minutes maximum (or whatever that is in metric). Fortunately being "Mr Peter" and their only guest, these rules were relaxed so I had no such limitation but I can't help but feel that if ML wants to attract serious underwater photographers they will have to modify this to cater for our eccentric requirements.

The current local dive guides are very good, enthusiastic and keen to find what you want. However I had to encourage Ramon not to use a small stick to tap the reef to see if anything exotic moved. Once encouraged, it never happened again. The beauty of the digital age is that I was able to



This cuttlefish was trying to tell me something as its colour changing body pulsed rapidly. Maybe he (she?) just wanted its picture taken. Nikon D100, Subal D10 housing, 28-70 lens, Inon Z220 strobe. F11, half power.

show Ronnie and Ramon the best shots on my laptop in the evenings and this helped to build enthusiasm for finding new subjects. I was not, however, discouraged when they remarked that they'd seen better shots by other underwater photographers. I just took it as an indication that they should understand the fragile ego of an underwater photographer a bit better. In truth, they never actually said that. It was more like "Ooh" and "Aah, they're brilliant. So sharp, colourful and beautifully composed."

There is just one last point I

must make because I feel it is very important not only for visiting divers but also for the management to sort out. On a lot of dives my air was extremely dry. Now this is not something that I have ever really experienced. I have been in the Red Sea and heard such grumbles from fellow divers yet I had not noticed a similar problem. I put it down to them being too delicate, not macho enough or just plain wrong. However in this case the air was so dry my tongue was almost glued to the roof of my mouth and a rinse in salt water seemed an



Dive guides Ramon (left) and Ronnie (right) with "Mr" Peter on the dive boat.

acceptable alternative.

When I pointed this out I was told that the compressor is "automatic" and no more was done about it. When I pointed it out the next day that the air was still as dry (I always point out, I never complain) I got the same response. ML. If you read this. I don't know anything about compressors but the Bauer you have has a problem with its "automatic" setting. If anyone from Bauer is reading this, please contact ML to maintain your normally high reputation.

I guess nowhere is perfect but, for me, ML came pretty close to it. I

had a great week as their guest. It was a privilege to be able to dive a completely new area and I think it will become a major player in the underwater photography world as it provides an attractive combination of luxury accommodation, service and diving.

Dammit. I'm already thinking of taking my partner Debbie there next year.

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IT'S ABOUT TIME

Time. It's a precious commodity. For most of us our trips abroad are measured in days and our time underwater in minutes.



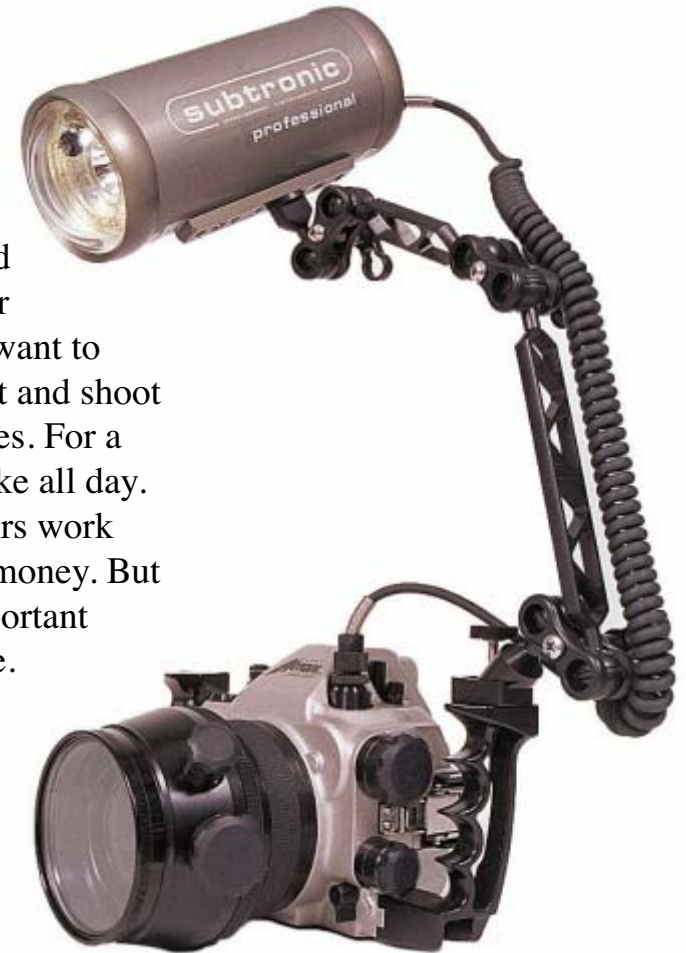
At Ocean Optics we believe time is something to be invested. Which is why you'll find we won't rush you when it comes to choosing your equipment. And that when you buy from us we'll want to take you through your system in detail. For a point and shoot digital system that might only mean twenty minutes. For a complete digital or film based SLR outfit it can take all day.

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