

The best of both worlds

Tasik Ria & Kungkungan Bay

By Peter Rowlands

The offer of a flight only trip to visit two resorts in North Sulawesi in early December was too good to turn down. Three days at Tasik Ria Resort and three at the renowned Kungkungan Bay Resort would combine diving the spectacular Bunaken Marine Reserve then immerse myself in some glorious 'muck' diving.

As with my previous trip to this area last year I made sure that my flights to Singapore and from there to Manado were less than 24 hours apart so I could check my baggage all the way through yet still overnight in Singapore for a useful adjustment time for both body clock and climate.

Jim Yanny of Eco Divers, who had offered us the trip, met us at the airport and his welcome staff made light of the luggage. Less than an hour later we had driven through the seemingly endless sprawl of Manado, survived numerous near head on collisions and were entering the impressive Tasik Ria Resort.

'Resort' is defined in the dictionary as 'place frequented for some purpose or quality (health, holiday etc)' and they're not using the

term wrongly at Tasik Ria. The resort has a mature, solid feel with 22 pool-view rooms and 14 sea-view cottages interspersed with well tended gardens and tall palm trees.

My American dive buddy, Brian Jacobson, and I shared a pool-view room with air-conditioned ensuite mini-bar facilities, three features in a room which I have grown very accustomed to in my senior years but, as usual, there was never enough ice for Brian's drinks (Brian, ice takes up valuable alcohol space..) but a quick trip to the poolside bar saw him returning with a barrow load which he deemed sufficient for his first sundowner.

Brian and I were both shooting video this trip so we had two cases each - one for the equipment and a much larger one for the equipment chargers (when will we have a single charger that does everything?!). There are ample two pin round sockets to cater for any underwater photographer's charging needs and still have room to plug my hairdrier in.

The dive centre is a short walk from the room and there is another

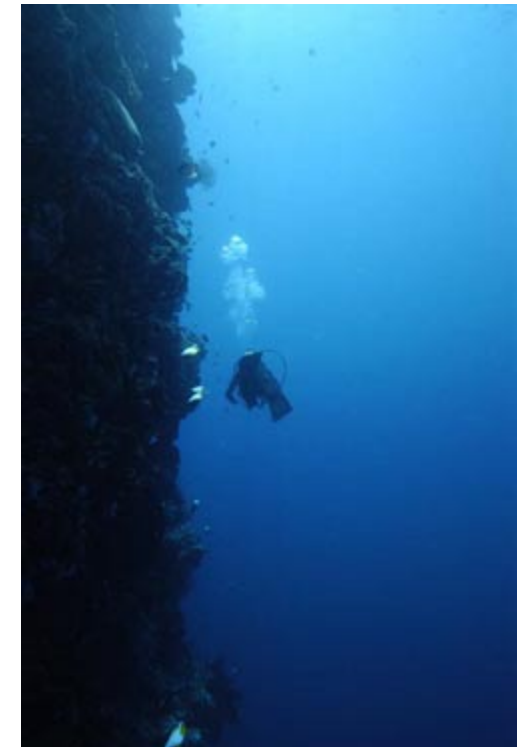


(Above) Eco Divers fleet at Tasik Ria
(Right) A wall dive at Bunaken

short walk to the pier. A photo room is being built as we speak at the pier to eliminate the need to lug photo rigs back and forward.

The main attraction of diving at Tasik Ria is the Bunaken Marine Reserve, a world class sanctuary with some stunning and varied wall and reef dives. It is an hour's boat ride so trips leave at 8am and you return at about 4.30pm having had three good hour long dives punctuated by a very tasty lunch of local cuisine.

There are three dive boats - small, medium and large - so, if you





The speed boats at KBR mean your maximum time to a dive site is no more than 10 minutes

This chap kept us amused pushing out coral from his hole. Olympus C40/PT-012, Auto



Thankfully this one is not in an aquarium Olympus C40/PT-012, Auto



were to book as a small group, Eco Divers would do their utmost to cater for the needs of you mildly eccentric underwater photographers and provide a tailored itinerary to suit you.

The dive guides at Tasik Ria are very friendly and knowledgeable, attentive when needed yet still give you space and time to operate underwater. Ours had a lovely gentle signaller to tell us he/she had found something interesting. It was a small ball bearing in a tube which they tinkled rather like a soft 'Afternoon tea' bell.

Brian and I enjoyed the Bunaken dives very much but we were just as keen to sample Tasik Ria's muck diving so we dived their nearby house reef which was excellent and a two minute boat ride away. One area had artificial 'reef balls' installed which were an absolute haven for a wide variety of marine subjects of varying sizes and Brian and I shot plenty of footage including a most co-operative green mantis shrimp comically removing small clumps of coral from around his hole. How easily we are pleased.

Night dives are available by arrangement and there is also a dusk dive on which mating mandarin fish are the main attraction.

After a fun day's diving and with the batteries on charge, it was time to top up our alcohol levels at the poolside bar where their list of cocktails was impressive. Suitably topped up we sauntered to dinner which was a good blend of local and international cuisine served by very friendly staff.

The three days flew by and after the last dive on the third day our photo rigs and dive bags were transferred to Kungkungan Bay Resort without us needing to disassemble them. Lovely.

Readers may remember my trip to this area last year when I experienced the local driving skills



Nudibranch graffitti



Leaf fish were very common and even I spotted some.

in all their scary glory. Overtaking into head on traffic yet calmly avoiding contact at the last minute without a fist being raised by either party. Now imagine the same thing again - only at night. Once again they displayed their skills of daring-do, only this time into the paths of oncoming lights. Our driver even had time to take a few mobile phone calls presumably from his wife checking up to see if he was still alive.

Kungkungan Bay Resort is a credit to the pioneering spirit of its American founders and I doubt if there is any underwater photographer who hasn't seen the stunning macro life images which have been taken

off its shores. When it was opened it attracted world class photographers some of whom stayed there for months as more and more exotic creatures were discovered and captured in all their glory.

Such award winning images were not taken in a twenty minute dive but were the result of many hours underwater, often at night, with back up cylinders and vigilant dive guides.

Those were indeed pioneering days but, as the owners' accountants pointed out, such intensive diving practices resulted in high overtime wages and little or no profit. Add to that the 9/11 effect on tourism in the area and KBR was becoming a

financial hole.

Enter Jim and Cary Yanny of Eco Divers who were hired to turn the resort around. Between them they have a wealth of experience from the Red Sea with Emperor Divers and they both recognised a challenge when they saw it. I don't think I would be unkind to say that in recent times KBR had slipped down the popularity stakes but Jim and Cary together with their managers Miranda van Roon and Steve Coverdale aim to put that right and they have already made progress.

There are 16 rooms in three categories - Traditional House, Cottage Suite and Deluxe. We stayed in a large cottage right on the waters'

edge just a short walk from the main catering and swimming pool centre and from the dive briefing area and very impressive photo room. Only the deluxe rooms are air-conditioned and there were times when it was very sticky and hot that I felt like going up to a Deluxe room to ask for a cup of sugar and then stay there overnight.

The diving at KBR is all about muck diving accessed by fast boats meaning a 10 minute ride at most. There are three dives a day at 0815, 1115 and 1445. Even at full capacity, the dive guide to diver ratio is good. Their English is certainly better than my Sulawesi which is nil but there was an air of timidity about most of them which I was not expecting. I had heard tales of these Tensing like characters whose keen eye and hard work had led to some amazing discoveries in the pioneering days.

Underwater, however, they seemed intent on showing us as much as possible even though we were happy to observe and photograph their first creature. No sooner had we settled when there was a loud blast on an air horn telling us to get over to where they'd found something else. The loud blast of compressed air sounded like an angry fart on land and was a far cry from the tinkle, tinkle at Tasik Ria.

Admittedly the visibility at KBR was not as good but I got the impression they were using their farts



There are 16 rooms in three categories - Traditional House, Cottage Suite and Deluxe. The deluxe have air-conditioning

to keep us herded together like whales use bubble screens. After a while it became slightly annoying and felt as if they were just going through the motions of showing us as much as possible in the maximum 60 minute dive without allowing us time to concentrate on our photography. If they want to attract keen underwater photographers to return, some toning down and retraining would be needed.

On one dive my guide farted loudly to me that he had found some flambuoyant cuttlefish eggs in a coconut shell. I came over to him and signalled my thanks and settled down to get some good, well lit footage. After a short time, damn me if he didn't fart again and then again in quick succession. This definitely was irritating as it made me jolt my video camera in mid shot so I abandoned

it and went over to where I was being abruptly summoned. My farter seemed unaffected by my glare as he pointed down towards the black sand. I glanced at the area unimpressed but then saw the flambuoyant cuttlefish pulsating. I forgive you, I forgive you. Just get a gentler signalling device.

Attracting underwater photographers to a fragile eco system is a contradiction in terms. I fully admit that there are those among us (and I am one sometimes) who deserve our reputation for careless control when trying to get a shot or a nice angle and the staff at KBR are strict with their guidelines about bouyancy and quite rightly so. If they are to preserve their unique marine heritage they must maintain discipline. Make sure you practice your buoyancy skills before visiting KBR. It will be worth it.

A week is too short a time to evaluate two resorts in detail, bond with the staff and dive guides and get some memorable images but in my short time I sampled good hospitality, very friendly staff and top quality diving.

In diving terms with Bunaken and muck diving, Tasik Ria and Kungkungan Bay really do offer the best of both worlds.

Peter Rowlands
peter@uwpmag.com

Bunaken & Lembeh North Sulawesi



Dive Operator/Retailer.
Host of Asian Diver Magazine's Photo Shoot-Out
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Specialist in underwater photography. Three resident European photo pros offering photo seminars, rentals, courses & sales.

Bunaken National Park, winner of British Airways' Global First Prize for responsible tourism, offers world-class wall diving.
The Lembeh Strait is arguably the most diverse and rich muck-diving destination on the planet.

Two-centre stays available to dive and photograph both unique environments. Quality resort accommodation available in both locations - Tasik Ria Resort in Manado, for diving Bunaken and Kungkungan Bay Resort in Lembeh.

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