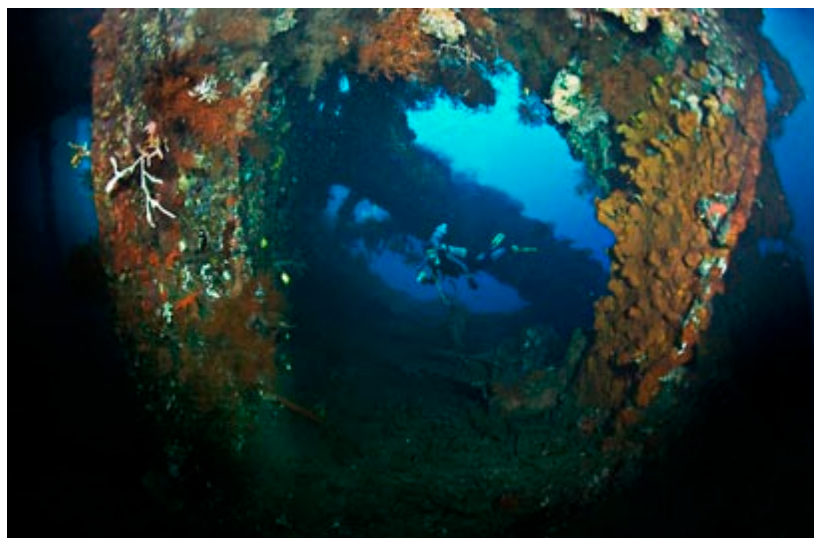


Diving Bali's North-East

By Mathieu Meur

Bali is generally not perceived as a dive destination in itself. Divers who head there for its beaches, mountains, parties or handicraft often discover its amazing underwater scenery by chance, and get at best a couple of dives in before having to head back home.

Considering the wealth of Bali's reefs, this means missing out on some of the best dive sites around Asia. Bali is a rather large island with numerous possibilities in terms of diving such as Nusa Penida in the South and Secret Bay to the West. Unfortunately, due to its large size and busy, narrow roadways, travelling from the main area of activities to dive sites takes a considerable amount of time. One of the richest and most varied areas is located in the North-east, near the village of Tulamben. In order to make the most of dive opportunities, and avoid long hours of road travel, it is best to stay at a dive resort there.



A diver visits accessible areas inside the famous Liberty Wreck (Nikon D1X, Nikkor 10.5mm, F2.8, 1/320s, ISO 125, 2xIkelite strobes)

The Liberty

The small village of Tulamben is home to the Liberty Wreck, undoubtedly one of Bali's best-known dive sites, and a world-class wreck, by any standard. It is a must-see for all divers visiting Bali. Dating back to the early part of the 20th Century, the Liberty sank during WWII under Japanese assault. Now some 60-odd years later, the sea has reclaimed this wreck, with lush coral and sponge growths covering its hull, a large density of schooling fish

seeking refuge in and around it, and a plethora of small critters hiding in cracks and recesses. Photo opportunities are diverse and plentiful, warranting several dives to make the most of it. Fisheye lenses will do great here to capture the wreck and its larger visitors, which include bumphead parrotfish, schools of surgeonfish and snapper, sweetlip, preying trevally and barracuda, while a macro lens will allow you to capture its smaller inhabitants, such as pygmy seahorse, shrimps and porcelain crabs. To make the most of this dive site, it's best to book your accommodation



Bali's reefs are rich in marine life with healthy corals. (Nikon D1X, Nikkor 10.5mm, F7.1, 1/125s, ISO 125, 2xIkelite strobes)

nearby so as to beat the crowd with an early morning or a night dive.

Tulamben Drop-off

Just a stone throw from the Liberty is the Tulamben drop-off. The dive start on a black sandy slope, which turns into a vertical wall covered with large sea fans, sponges, healthy corals, and colourful ascidians. But the main attraction of this dive actually unfolds out in the blue, where schools of fusiliers vie for attention with snappers. On a good day, you'll encounter trevally, Napoleon wrasse, and may also catch a glimpse of blacktip or whitetip sharks. Although this dive has potential for both macro and wide-angle photo opportunities, the latter certainly offers the most interest, in particular the sea fans and the pelagic action.



Seraya Secrets

On a totally different note, the shore dive site commonly known as Seraya Secrets, located immediately

in front of the Scuba Seraya Resort, offers an amazing array of macro subjects. This site easily competes with some of the better-known muck diving locations. It is

home to a host of critters that are considered rare anywhere, but can predictably be found there, such as harlequin shrimps, ghost pipefish, thorny seahorse, frogfish,



(Left) A moray getting cleaned by a couple of shrimps at Batu Kelebit (Nikon D1X, Nikkor 60mm, F13 1/200s, ISO 125, 2xIkelite strobes)

(Above) Rarely seen at most dive sites, several harlequin shrimps can predictably be observed at Seraya Secrets. Seen here feeding on the arm of a sea star (Nikon D100, Sigma 150mm, F9, 1/180s, ISO 200, 2xInon strobes)

and the list goes on. Macro lenses are a must here. Having dived it time after time, it's safe for me to say that you'll always find something different and unusual on every dive. On one dive, this could be rare nudibranchs, which are abundant here. On the next, it could be purple commensal urchin shrimps. In fact, the day dives were so good that I eventually accepted the invitation of the dive guides to go for a night dive... and kicked myself for not accepting earlier. At night, it seems that the richness of this site is multiplied by 10, as if that was possible. A host of colourful crustaceans can be seen everywhere, ranging from crinoid, to bumblebee, cleaner, and hinge-beak shrimps. All sorts of crabs can be seen roaming the sandy bottom, such as spider, decorator, sponge, and boxer crabs. Lionfish and moray eels are also on the prowl, hunting for dinner, as are Spanish dancers, seashells and flatworms. The abundance of potential subjects will surprise even the most seasoned photographer, and since it is relatively shallow extended dives are commonplace here. This site has to be one of the best muck dives anywhere!

Paradise

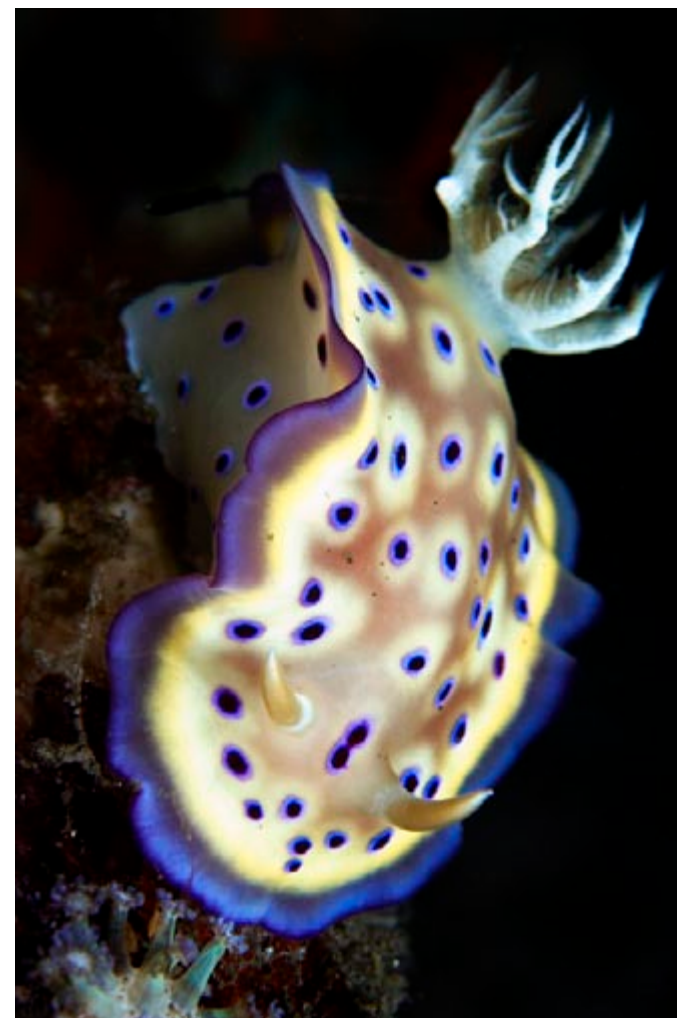
Located in front of Paradise Restaurant, in Tulamben Bay, this shallow dive site is perfect for a long, relaxed dive, hunting for small subjects hiding on the rocky bottom. The latter is covered with polished black pebbles in which squat lobster, crabs, shrimps, nudibranchs and other critters seek refuge. While reef fishes are abundant too, the focus is clearly on macro subjects here. This is the sort of dive site where it pays off to be patient and move slowly, waiting for crustaceans and other animals to appear. Here again, a macro set-up is a must-have.



Crinoid shrimps mimicking their host can be seen all over Seraya Secrets (Nikon D100, Nikkor 60mm, F22, 1/160s, ISO 200, 2xInon strobes)

Kubu

Located a short distance to the West of the Liberty Wreck, Kubu offers a dense, healthy coral cover and a rich fauna, just like most of the reef sites around Bali's North-east. The dive starts off



Nudibranchs can be seen on most dive sites around Bali, but are particularly abundant at Seraya Secrets (Nikon D100, Nikkor 60mm, F16, 1/160s, ISO 200, 2xInon strobes)

on a black sandy slope with sparse, large coral bommies. These are covered with soft and hard corals, sponges, hydroids and ascidians, and are home to a plethora of reef fishes. The sand soon



There's a host of tiny critters waiting to be photographed, such as this unusual yellow coral shrimp at Seraya Secrets (Nikon D100, Nikkor 60mm + 2x Teleconverter, F14, 1/160s, ISO 200, 2xInon strobes)

disappears and turns into large fields of algae, soft corals and hard corals, where angelfish, butterflyfish and other common tropical fish reside. It's good to keep an eye out on the open, as whitetip sharks and other pelagic species are often observed there, especially when current is present. It's best to select a wide-angle or fisheye lens for this site.



The sun sets on Agung, Bali's volcano.

Batu Niti

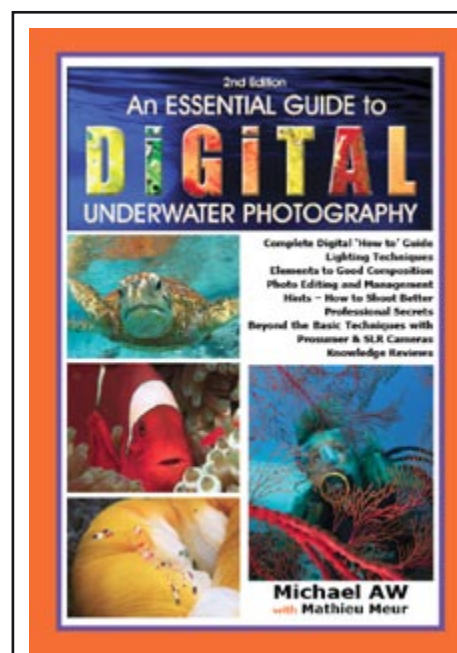
Batu Niti is located about 15 minutes by speedboat from Tulamben Bay. The gentle slope of Batu Niti offers opportunities for anything from deep dives to extended shallow dives. Massive barrel sponges line up the deeper portion of this site, while trevally and barracuda can be seen in the open water. The marine fauna on the slope itself is composed of typical tropical reef fishes, pufferfish, lionfish, octopus, as well as mantis shrimp. Portrait and wide-angle lenses will do well here. For those with a taste for extreme macro, ghost shrimps can be found on most hydroids. Be ready to strain your eyes, though, as these shrimps are really small, and blend in perfectly with their host.

Final Words

The description of these few sites gives but a glimpse of the richness and diversity of dive sites around Bali's North-east. Most sites offer an incredible cover and variety of corals, paired with a dense fish and invertebrate population. This warrants planning a trip there purely for diving. The pace of life in Bali is pretty laid back, so digital photographers will have plenty of time to download and review pictures between dives, while lazing around the pool of their private bungalow. Best of all, although Bali is a relatively affordable destination easily reached from regional hubs, few divers actually make their way

there, which means dive sites are not crowded. Underwater photographers tired of waiting for their turn at photographing subjects will certainly appreciate this.

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