

# A DEAD Photographic Mission in North Sulawesi

Difficult, Expensive, Arduous, Demanding

By Michael Aw

I am a sucker for tight, most often impossible deadlines. It is not that I like to procrastinate to the last hour only to scramble to get the job done but it just seems to happen that way each time. Even with projects that I have diligently premeditated with a 12 month lead time, I will somehow end up rushing to complete in the last possible minutes. It may be that I am taking on too much, or there should be 36 hours in a day or just that I love the challenge, a kind of adrenaline fix I relish from my previous career in main stream advertising. I was once called upon to work on an airline campaign in 3 weeks – ie from strategies, conceptualization, and production to launch! But then I had a team of 20 with couple of hundred thousand dollars as production budget; we ended up making a three destination shoot for the TV commercial ... well, free travel, why not?

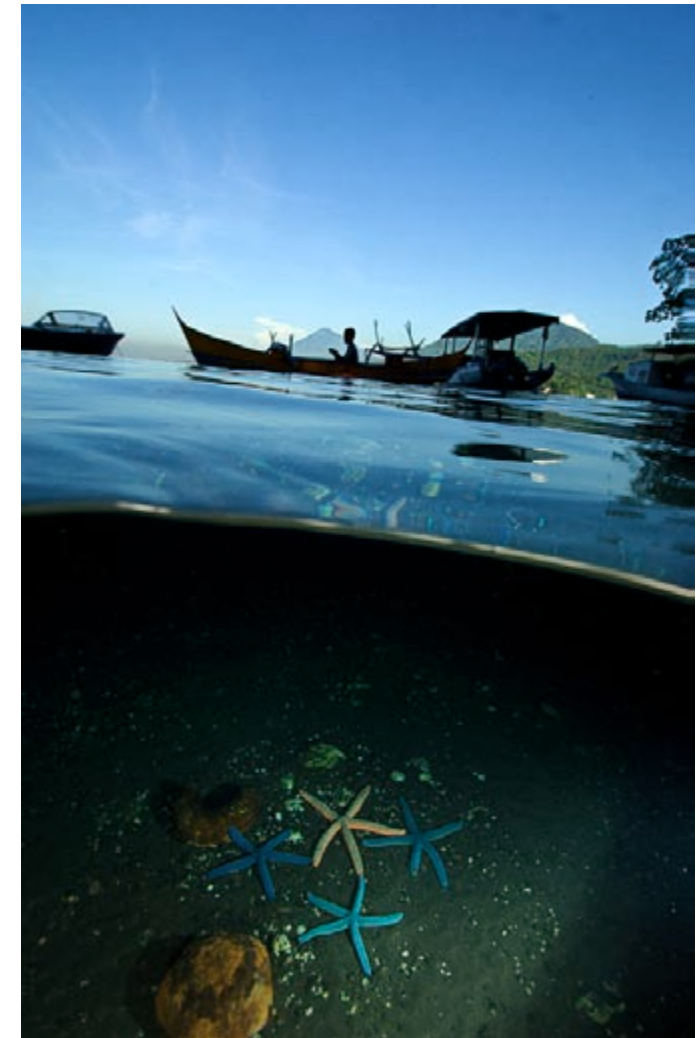
In my current profession as an underwater photographer, it is quite often I find myself writing and culling images to meet editorial deadline only the day before it was due; I enjoy the rush and perform better under pressure though my cardiologist has warned me that intense deadlines radically boost my risk of having a heart attack. Well, I have to live with it as there are a few clients who really love me to death; they seem to have the aptitude to send urgent request for a long wish list of images or editorial the night before I depart for an extended expedition. I have yet to learn to say no.

A current project that is putting me back into



a panic mode is one that is long overdue. My first book of the sea “Beneath Bunaken” has been out of print since 1997. There had been plans to do a third reprint but preference has always been to do a new book extending the coverage to Banka Islands, Lembah Strait and the Sangie Talaud Islands, north of Manado. Diligently in May of this year, I sat down to work on an agenda for the rest of 2006 and plan ahead for 2007. I finally penciled in to complete shooting and writing for a new North Sulawesi book this November for a 2007 April book launch. Well that was the perfect plan that all seems fine and doable with plenty of time to shoot, write and design.

Then on 1st of July, in the midst of the South



Africa Sardine Run expedition, I received an email for an order of 1000 copies but the catch is that the book must be ready by October 2006 for a DEMA launch in November. Red alert ... panic station! The new deadline dictates that the book must go to print in September, image selection, culling,



writing, design, editing in August which leaves me the rest of July to shoot ... but I am already committed to lead a leatherback turtle expedition to West Papua from 22 July. I really need fresh images ... unpublished pictures, images of the 'Big Five' of North Sulawesi in this new book. It is not just a wish list; it is a 'Must Include' list of seascapes images of underwater Banka Island, Bunaken, Napoleon wrasse, large green sea turtles, Rhinopias, mimic octopus and Pontohi pygmy seahorse. Between the safari in Africa and the start of the West Papua expedition, I have exactly

a nine-day window and that includes traveling time. In reality, I have only five shooting days. I prayed for good weather and co-operative subjects.

So I have just five days to shoot for a book that must in the end be superior to all my previous work. It will be upon this book my credibility and skills be judged. Its predecessor "Beneath Bunaken" I completed in 1993 was selected as Indonesia's official gift of state for the 1994 APEC. The pressure is on for 'Beneath North Sulawesi' to surpass. The images must be new, fresh and different. Adapting the

words of David Doubilet, I have to make pictures of underwater North Sulawesi that no one has ever seen before or, to make pictures that is different of underwater North Sulawesi that everybody has seen before. It is a very DEAD ((Difficult, Expensive, Arduous, Demanding) task I have imposed on myself.

Banka is easy... there are not many published pictures of the island, but Bunaken ... the small critters, especially those of Lembeh Strait are getting very tiresome appearing on every dive magazines in the region every second month. Between

swimming with the dolphins, sharks and sardines in Africa, I came up with a plan ... I need to commandeer my own live-aboard, one that will go where I want to go, when I want to go and as many times I wish to go ... I need to charter a boat to do a North Sulawesi safari shoot. Well I did accomplished the shoot in five days, captured some new images and if all goes well, 'Beneath North Sulawesi' will be out in October. It is not rocket science; here is how I did it.

The Dive Platform: I was fortunate to have the service of MV Sabina, a brand new purposed



built 19m length mono hull vessel own by Odyssey Divers in Manado. With an average cruising speed of 12 knots I was able to run back and forth between Banka, the Bunaken Islands and Lembeh Strait several times over six days. The generator runs for 24 hours, air conditioned cabins with state of the art navigation set up. Though I am equipped with an Iridium Satellite phone, we have GSM coverage in most areas of Bunaken and Lembeh Strait. In the evening I will bring the vessel back to

the home bay of Sabina or to Murex Resort where wireless network from shores allowed me to check emails and research scientific names from the web. The vessel served brilliantly as my floating office and dive platform. The cost of chartering the Sabina is USD 600 per day which comes with a crew of four, unlimited diving and all meals included. For live-aboard charter, the boat allows for six people, but to be comfortable, four is a good number. Since I am the only photographer with two guides the

vessel is seemingly palatial for the purpose.

Day One & Two – Banka and Talise Islands area; as I do not have many good images from these islands, the two days here are exceptionally crucial. Though coral is less varied than Bunaken, the highlights of the area are the sea mounts and pinnacles. Several of them are completely occupied with soft corals, sponges, fans in colour of rainbow these rock formations are visited frequently by bigger animals such as dugongs,

marlin, barracudas, trevallies, Black-tip sharks and Dog-tooth tunas. However diving the pinnacles can be tricky; the current is strong and unpredictable. As time is of the essence, I can't really afford any errors or unproductive dives. Diving at the 'right time' and the best spot of each site is an absolute essential.

Though not necessarily the most colourful, Sahaung is the most well known group of pinnacles at Banka. On the first dive of the first morning, I was dropped down current from the best of the three pinnacles. Though I managed a couple of good scenes, I could have done better. Upon surfacing I made a call to Paul, the son of Dr Hanny Batuna the pioneer of diving in North Sulawesi to join me for the safari. As Paul now runs the family resort property in Banka, he would know the area best. Two hours later, we rendezvoused at Paradise jetty, and he selected for me the crème de la crème of the 40 sites that I must cover over the two days. I shot the best of the pinnacles, a couple of Hippocampus Pontohi (this scientific name is still unofficial for this pygmy first sighted in Bunaken)

Day Three – Bunaken, Manado Tua Marine Park; I chose to dive Tanjong Kopi and Mandolin for the school of jacks, barracudas, wall of soft corals and the ethereal lobster cave. However the few important



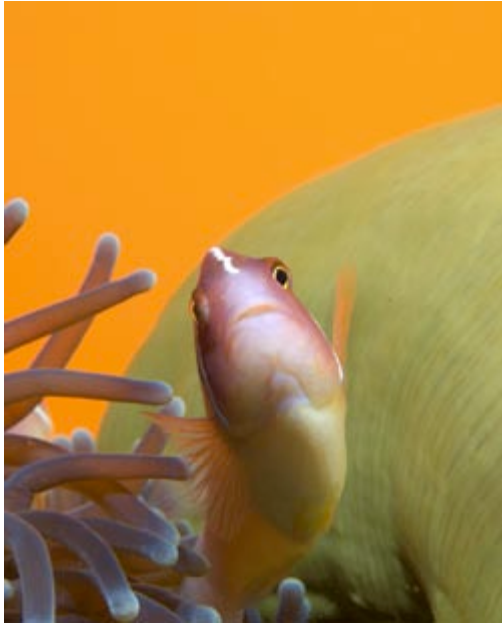
subjects in my 'must shoot' list are white tip sharks, large Green sea turtles and Napoleon wrasse. The first two are relatively easy to find. Since the formation of the North Sulawesi Watersports Association and initiation of vigilant monitoring program, the population of white-tips and sea turtles are noticeably on the increase. I got the shot of the shark at Johnson Wall and a one metre sized Green turtle at Lekuan One. The Napoleon wrasse seems to be elusive. The friendly one we know of at Fukui was sadly speared by a recalcitrant



fisherman last year. I called Danny Charlton, the proprietor of Murex Diving at Lembeh Resort for assistance. He then broadcast a SMS to all the dive operators in the area for recent sightings of big Napoleon wrasse in the marine parks. I received a SMS report in 15 minutes and successfully captured a good picture of a *Chelinus undulatus* one hour later!

Day Four – this is Lembeh Strait day. Danny Charlton graciously loaned me Ronald, his best guide for Lembeh Strait. The yellow and purple *Rhinopias eschmeyeri* and *frondosa* were easily

found and I even managed to shoot some Banggai Cardinalfish living among the Skunk anemonefish. As my repertoire of Mandarinfish mating are mostly from Palau, Ronald and I worked on getting some new images from the house reef of Lembeh Resort. This again was accomplished at about 1800hr ... well it was hard work but it was the first time I seen a young male masturbating! The challenge for the day was to get feeding shot of Bobbit worms (*Eunice aphroditois*). This proved to be a challenge for both of us to earn our manhood! Well, we worked into the night and did we get the surprise? It all shall be revealed in October 2006.



my guides. Well that is until I told the little princess that she had to put her head into the water hanging out from a wobbly dug out canoe ... all I got was her shaking her head candidly ... NO! NO! NO! Okay, lets try another scene ... since she swims like a fish, I asked her to just simply swim underwater to point at a sea star... NO! NO! NO! An hour or so later with lots of cajoling and demonstration from three adults, I finally got my shot.

In a nutshell, for more than 10 years I have planned to shoot for this book but about 50% of the images selected are shot in the last five shooting days. As Beneath North SulawesiSea is to be complimented with a DVD, I have to rope in additional video imagery from Stuart Ireland and pressed award winning composer Eric Bettens from Belgium to write original theme music for the production. Urgent and due yesterday of course! So with good friends and associates, I have the opportunity and with a bit of luck, every thing seems to fall into place at the right time ... at the most critical time. By the way I am writing this story in the midst of culling images for Beneath North SulawesiSea.

Day Five – the final day was supposed to be an easy one. The morning was spent procuring those large fish eye images of coral meadows from various angles, large giant clams and some over and under seascapes. I needed a parting shot for the book. As the underlying message of the project is to inspire the local to preserve the natural heritage of North Sulawesi for their children, I required a child to serve as the icon for the image. Once again I call for assistance, this time to Angelique Batuna at WWF Manado. Alexandra her five-year old daughter would be finished school at 1300 hrs and she will bring her to meet us at Fukui at 1500hrs. Easily done ... a piece of cake I told

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