

The East Coast of Bali

with Don Silcock

The north coast of Bali is well known for the excellent diving at Tulamben's Liberty wreck and the weird & wonderful critters to be found at the muck sites at Seraya, Purl Jati (PJ) & Secret Bay. Getting to these sites means a 3 to 4 hour drive from the main tourist area of Kuta and involves a trip up the scenic east coast of the island.

I have made that journey many times and normally stop for a toilet break at Candi Dasa, about 60 km north of Kuta. Often referred to as the eastern frontier of tourism in Bali, Candi Dasa is a pleasant small town located at the northern end of Amuk Bay and hosts a wide selection of hotels, restaurants & cafes.

In December 2006 I decided that instead of passing through Candi Dasa I would stay there and dive the east coast. In all I made 33 dives on that trip and the purpose of this article is to document what there is to see in this area of Island Of The Gods.

Dive Sites

There are two things you really need to know about diving on the east coast - first the area is subject to some of the strongest currents you are ever likely to experience and secondly the water can be really cool so a 5mm wetsuit is highly recommended.

The strong currents are the result of the Indonesian Throughflow (see sidebar) and the water temperatures are produced by the cold-water upwellings from the deep trenches to the north & south of Bali. This is a powerful combination that acts as the catalyst for some really great diving, but a good guide with local knowledge and experience is essential if you want to experience the sites safely.

Reef scenic - Nusa Penida
D200 & Subal housing, Dual SS200
strobes, Nikon 10.5, f9 @ 1/60, Manual
Exposure

Large cuttlefish on the bommie at the
Blue Lagoon
D200 & Subal housing, Dual SS200
strobes, Nikon 70-180, f8 @ 1/60,
Manual Exposure



Amuk Bay - The Blue Lagoon, Mimpang & Gili Tepekong

Amuk Bay itself is roughly 8km wide, with Candi Dasa at the northern end and Padangbai just round the southern tip of the bay. Padangbai is a small but very pleasant & picturesque fishing village, best known as the place to catch the ferry to Lombok and where most of the dive operators working the east coast depart from.

The three main dive areas offer quite considerable diversity and each one has its own unique features:

The Blue Lagoon is the location that less experienced divers are usually taken to first, as the dive sites in this area are generally much less exposed to the strong currents experienced at the other sites. However, don't let this fool you into thinking that this is a second rate area - it's not and of the six dives experienced here I was impressed with the health of the bommies and the general marine life.

More of a macro than a wide angle area, I saw a great selection of frogfish, leaf scorpion fish, moray eels, scorpion & stone fish, blue spotted stingrays and lots of nudibranchs.

The name Blue Lagoon conjures up images of deserted Pacific Ocean islands with swaying palm trees, however it's actually a small bay

located just around the headland and to the northeast of Padangbai bay. There is a small resort located right on the beach, which is popular with tourists from Candi Dasa who go there to snorkel.

The more correct name for the area is Tanjung Sari and there are a number of sites to dive, not just the bay in front of the resort. The relative lack of currents and maximum depths of around 15-18m offer a pleasant combination of an uncomplicated dive site but with plenty to see.

Gili Mimpang is one of three islands located just outside Amuk Bay as the seafloor starts to drop down into the depths of the Lombok Strait, which means that all three spots are subject to the strong currents associated with the Throughflow. None of them are suitable for newly qualified divers and again a good guide is essential for even the most experienced diver.

*Jelly fish at Biaha
D200 & Subal housing, Dual SS200
strobes, Nikon 12-24, f6.3 @ 1/60,
Manual Exposure*

*Leaf scorpion fish on the bommie at the
Blue Lagoon
D200 & Subal housing, Dual SS200
strobes, Nikon 70-180, f20 @ 1/60,
Manual Exposure*





The other two islands are Gili Tepekong and Gili Biaha, with Tepekong about 1 km south-east of Mimpang and Biaha about 4 km north-east.

Gili Mimpang is actually a group of small islands, three of which break the surface and are known as Batu

Tiga. Local legend has it that they were used for target practice by the Indonesian air force in the 1960's – thus possibly explaining why they are so broken up compared to the very solid lumps of rock that make up Tepekong & Biaha. Mimpang's position is closer towards Amuk Bay,



Anthias on the reef at Nusa Penida

D200 & Subal housing, Dual SS200 strobes, Nikon 12-24, f7.1 @ 1/60, Manual Exposure

Moray eel on a bommie at Nusa Penida

D200 & Subal housing, Dual SS200 strobes, Nikon 17-55, f11 @ 1/60, Manual Exposure

which means that it is less exposed to the currents of the Lombok Strait and therefore is often considered to be a lesser site than the other two.

My experience from two days of diving both Mimpang and the nearby Tepekong is that it has a great deal to offer, particularly the southern edge of the site where there are some excellent small caves teeming with fish life

and very healthy soft coral which are surrounded by very photogenic glass fish.

I was amply rewarded for visiting Mimpang when, on the first dive of the second day, my very excited dive guide Mitra basically dragged me away from the caves giving me a very strange hand sign that I subsequently learned is the local



Mola Mola at Nusa Penida

D200 & Subal housing, Dual SS200 strobes, Nikon 17-55, f6.3 @ 1/60, Manual Exposure

code for the Mola Mola, or Oceanic Sun Fish, that this area of Bali is well known for at certain times of the year.

I have long wanted to photograph the Mola Mola, but was not expecting to be so fortunate as it was late December, and September is known as the time to see them. Not only did one grace us with its amazing presence that day, but I was actually able to photograph it as I had made the decision to use a fish-eye lens after being shown the cave area on the previous day.

They really are a unique creature,

almost 3m from tip to tip they appear quite ungainly at first glance but can move very quickly, as I learned when I tried to get “the shot”. A true pelagic about which very little is known, they are believed to come to this area of Bali to be cleaned of parasites – usually by the common banner fish, which was indeed the case with the one we saw that day.

The southern edge and the western side of Mimpang are one of the best places in Bali to see white tip reef sharks and on my second day I saw a group of about 10 larges



Reef scenic - Nusa Penida

D200 & Subal housing, Dual SS200 strobes, Nikon 10.5, f9 @ 1/60, Manual Exposure

ones swimming in the strong current. Like most sharks they are wary of divers, particularly ones emitting large streams of bubbles as they struggle against the current to get in position to take photographs – no award winning shots that day!

Gili Tepekong is only 1 km from Mimpang but the conditions can vary considerably between the two sites and often when one can be dived in safety, the other is out of the question.

Located as it is, right on the edge of the Lombok Strait, Gili Tepekong is swept by the Indonesian Throughflow

which means that when it is safe to dive the site it is spectacular, but if you try to dive the site in the wrong conditions you may experience the so-called toilet effect where instead of going up to the surface as nature intended, your bubbles are spiraling in the opposite direction - caught in one of the infamous down-currents that make the east coast so potentially challenging.

Definitely a site only for experienced divers, Tepekong rewards those who do venture there with some spectacular diving. The highlight



Reef scenic - Nusa Penida

D200 & Subal housing, Dual SS200 strobes, Nikon 10.5, f13 @ 1/60, Manual Exposure

of which is the Canyon at the south-western tip of the site where fallen rocks from the island have created an area reminiscent of Roman ruins that is now populated by large schools of sweetlips, jacks, groupers and white tip reef sharks.

The Canyon has apparently established a reputation as a “must dive” location but many operators are very reluctant to take divers there because of the dangers of the downdraft. Patience and trust in your dive guide are a must, because if they tell you that the conditions

are not suitable you need to accept their judgment as they can read the situation better than you can.

Such was the story on the days I was diving Tepekong and my guide Mitra knew how much I wanted to dive the Canyon, but cautioned me against it, which is basically what you are paying for – good advice!

At the northern tip of Tepekong there is a site known as the “Faux Canyon”, as apparently some operators have been known to take divers there and tell them it is the real Canyon! I dived this site a few times

and enjoyed it, particularly the shark nursery – a wide but low & tapering cave that is host to a substantial number of white tip sharks. It’s called the nursery because of the baby white tips that are always found there and infact the first couple of times I visited, that was all I found – 4 to 5 one metre long juveniles. However on the last dive it must have been lunchtime, as mum & dad were home as well and although initially quite camera shy they started to come closer & closer. Quite an exciting sensation when you find yourself jammed into the cave due to the strong surge!

Nusa Penida - Sental, Ped, SD & Toyapakeh

Nusa Penida, together with Nusa Lembongan & Nusa Ceningan, is a group of three islands that sit right in the middle of the Lombok Strait between Bali and Lombok. This position means that their northern coasts bear the full brunt of the Indonesian Throughflow as it hits the islands, and the western & eastern coasts experience very strong currents due to the huge volumes of water sweeping past.

Nusa Penida is by far the largest of the three islands - roughly 18 km long & 14 km wide, compared to the combined size of Lembongan & Ceningan at just 3 by 5 km. Separated

from Lembongan & Ceningan by the Toyapakeh Strait, Penida is a low, dry limestone island, which means that it does not have the wet season heavy river run-offs that significantly reduce the underwater visibility.

I had read stories of the excellent visibility and healthy reefs on the northern & northwest coasts of Nusa Penida, but had also heard others about coral bleaching as a result of El Nino in 1998 and I guess my expectations were fairly low. However on my first few dives there I was frankly quite stunned by the 25m plus visibility, excellent fish life and overall vibrancy of the reefs.

The water temperature at all the sites on the north coast – Sental, Ped & SD and Toyapakeh on the northwest coast can be really quite cold and my computer registered 22 Deg C on one dive! But the strong currents and nutrient rich, cold-water upwellings combine to create some tremendously rewarding diving.

I had also read that many of the Nusa Penida sites were not particularly good for underwater photography as the strong currents basically turn every dive into a high-speed drift. However, I actually got some of my best images of the trip on these sites by keeping close to the reef and looking for spots where I could shelter from the current.

The north & northeast coasts



*White tip reef shark at Tepekong
D200 & Subal housing, Dual SS200 strobes, Nikon 12-24, f7.1 @ 1/60, Manual Exposure*

of Nusa Penida are also known as locations to see the Mola Mola and to my surprise & delight on the 4th day of diving in the area I saw another one. This time I spotted it myself when something caught my eye down in the blue – I was at about 15m at the time and what I saw was a cloud of banner fish surrounding a large but non-descript lump of something. The lump was the Mola Mola looking up the reef slope, as it was cleaned of the many parasites that live on its body, and when it turned slightly my nitrogen saturated brain finally

registered what it was.

This time I did not have the fisheye lens, but it did not really matter as the Mola Mola only allowed me to get close enough for one shot before demonstrating its strange but very effective swimming technique and disappeared rapidly into the depths.

Conclusion

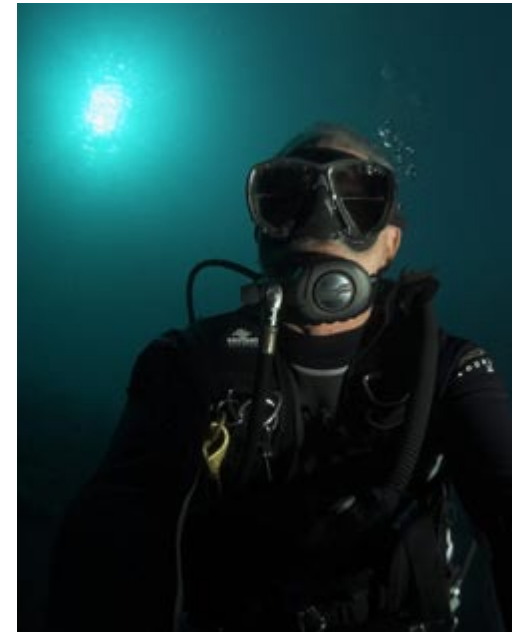
As a general rule of thumb, I much prefer liveaboard diving to land based – my day job pays for my

dive travel & cameras and, like most people, I get a limited number of days vacation every year. Liveaboards allow me to get the maximum diving in the shortest time, whereas land based diving usually restricts you to 3 dives a day and too much time getting to the sites.

Having said that, what I really liked about diving the East Coast on this trip were the logistics. I based myself in Candi Dasa and was picked up every morning about 08.30 for the 15-minute drive to Padangbai, where I was able to enjoy a Bali coffee at the Topi Inn (www.topiinn.com) whilst the dive boat was loaded with the gear for the day's diving.

We were usually on our way by about 09.15 and the maximum time to any of the sites was 40 minutes, but usually much less. The morning's two dives were done before noon and then it was time for a nice lunch ordered the day before from the Topi Inn, followed by a quick snooze.

The afternoon dive was usually completed by three and then it was back to Padingbai for a quick fresh water shower and another coffee before heading back to the hotel in time for a sundowner of ice cold Bintang whilst reviewing the days images – very civilized!



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Footnote

My visit to the East Coast of Bali was organized through AquaMarine Diving and I would like to thank Annabel Thomas and her staff for a first class trip, which was superbly organized and very professionally conducted.

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