

Not your average critter spotter

By Mike Veitch

Underwater photographers know the importance of having a great critter spotter when diving in far flung regions of the world. As one of the more popular underwater photography destinations on the planet, Indonesia is home to some of the most proficient and famous critter spotters of all. Many photographers return to locations such as Komodo, Lembeh, and Bali in order to work with the same guides time and again. However, upon returning to a resort the following year, it is not uncommon to find these great guides have moved on. Reasons for this can be attributed to “burn out” or better income potential in a different business. A third reason is a little more in depth and not often discussed. With many dive shops there is little chance of upward potential for locally trained staff beyond the divemaster level as the price of becoming an instructor is too high for the local standard of living.

Fortunately, there is a growing trend throughout South-East Asia to reverse this trend and train locals

in all aspects of the dive business. Recently, I had the opportunity to attend an instructor development course in Bali, Indonesia to help prepare five local Indonesians on their path to become fully certified scuba instructors. As four of the five worked for Bali Hai Diving Academy, I asked managing partner Michael Cortenbach why he felt so strongly about training his local employees to the highest level of recreational diving and what it meant to his company and the local community:

“We are one of the few companies to pay for all training, renewals, and insurance of all of our local staff. There is both a legal and ethical requirement to train locals in all aspects of our industry. We have always supported our staff in the way of training and further education as we strongly believe in Bali as a top diving destination. In order to grow the industry to its full potential it is necessary to have a broad base of Indonesian professionals involved. This is not only in the way of certification and knowledge





development but also support and encouragement from management by providing the tools, guidance, and opportunities to further develop skills. Even if they don't stay with our company and join another or start their own business, there is a benefit to the Indonesian diving industry as a whole by increasing the talent pool that will allow them to train other Indonesians and tourists."

How does making a dive guide into an instructor benefit a visiting underwater photographer? For me, the benefits of it were easy to see. The development class lasted over four weeks with daily knowledge development, in-water work, and most importantly: working on presentations, briefings, and leadership skills. As many visitors to different regions of the world have experienced, the water skills of local guides is impeccable but often there is something lost in translation when it comes to briefing, organizing dives, and discussing what critters can be found. Much of this is due to an innate shyness when dealing with demanding photographers who want to see everything and want to see it "NOW", but it can also be attributed to a lack of proper training in



organizational activities and public speaking.

One of the first things I noticed during the class was the importance of making presentations that Course Director Minni Vansgaard of Bali Crystal Divers instilled upon the participants. With daily presentations in front of their peers, the progress made in this area was stunning to watch. From first day jitters and nerves to thoughtful and confident presentations at the end of month, the skills of all involved improved dramatically as the amount of hard work each put into the class was obvious. According to Minni, "One of the biggest changes over the last few years is the desire by Indonesians to not only excel in their instructor classes but to continue on with further education when they are finished. There is a definite increase in wanting to improve their standing and you can see this by the way they commit themselves to the training."

For visiting photographers I see two positive impacts of this influx of locals participating in Instructor Development classes. The first is the above mentioned increase in self confidence. Communicating with groups and individual photographers and organizing them according



to needs and wants becomes easier with further training. The second impact is the feeling of empowerment and upward mobility that becoming an instructor provides. These invaluable "eagle eyed" guides now have the ability to earn extra income through instruction and perhaps move into future management positions. This creates a sense of pride and helps provide a stronger bond between employers and the local community. Locals who are given an opportunity to improve their education, training, and skills are far more likely to remain long term employees than those who do not receive this chance. Therefore, when you return to that special resort in Bali, your favourite guide will still be working there and can show you that elusive Mimic Octopus one more time!

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