

bracelet. Then they would group together in a big ball near the surface. They would start slapping, biting, chirping and chattering. Al told me to not get into the middle of this as a powerful “love slap” from a dolphin can knock your mask off. And if you’re in the middle of this, you’re fair game.

So we would dive down on the periphery and watch in amazement. Once they had enough the dolphins would dive down and swim off again only to surface perhaps 100 yards later and do the same thing. They was no pattern to this. At times they would swim far away from us. Other times they would come back and be right in our midst.

The younger ones would play with my lens or follow my snorkel model Yoko as she dipped down and twirled around. But the older ones were totally enthralled with this foreplay.

Actual dolphin mating takes less than a minute on the average. But the foreplay goes on for a long time. We left this unpredictable but fascinating group to look for some others. But they had been doing the mating dance for over an hour that we saw and showed no sign of stopping.

Bimini is a fascinating little place for the ocean lover. Aside from dolphins, sharks, wrecks and rays there is a marine lab there that

specializes in sharks and the extensive mangroves hold an amazing array of Caribbean juveniles. Free diving in the open ocean with curious dolphins is a dream for many. On Bimini, the dream can come true.

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海中遊泳
~ Into the Sea ~

East Kalimantan

By Alex Tyrrell

At the beginning of June 2008 I was leaving Thailand on my way to Jakarta, and after an overnight stop, boarded my early morning flight to Tarakan via Balikpapan both in Kalimantan, the Indonesian part of Borneo. This was the beginning of a four month diving adventure starting a new job as Trip Manager on the live-aboard boat Panunee Seamaster which would be cruising the Sulu Sea and visiting the islands of Derawan, Sangalaki, Kakaban and Maratua.

Panunee is normally based in Phuket from November to May plying the waters of the Similan and Surin Islands, plus regular trips into Myanmar (Burma) during January to April when the conditions are at their best. When the monsoon wind and rains come, Panunee leaves the Andaman Sea and heads down to Indonesia for calmer waters and this time had a change from Lembeh Straights, which it visited in previous years.

Panunee is a 32m steel hulled vessel that comfortably carries up to 20 divers and has Nitrox available at a reasonable cost. She has a crew of eight, plus 4 Divemasters, that are very helpful and the boat is accustomed to catering for photographers. They even have two cabins specifically designed with photographers/ videographers in mind with well lit set-up benches and blow guns located under your bunk. It helps that the owner of the boat, Jakrin Kittisarn, is fanatical about underwater photography, so has designed the boat and planned its itineraries with this in mind. Panunee is the only live-aboard boat in the area, so

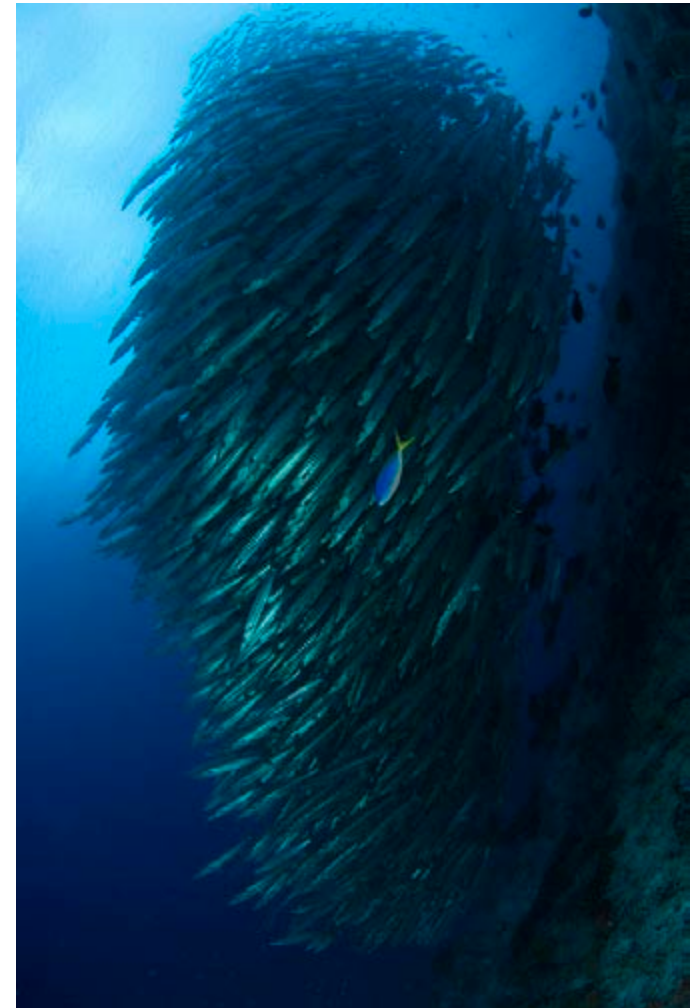


solitude underwater is guaranteed in this virgin area – we rarely saw other divers underwater.

There are small dive centers on Derawan (Derawan Dive Resort), Sangalaki (Sangalaki Dive Lodge) and two on Maratua (Maratua Paradise and Nabucco Dive Resort) where local diving and trips to the other islands can be arranged using small speedboats. However, the ease and comfort of live-aboard diving makes this option my preferred choice, especially for photographers who will want to change their lens set-ups for the different dive sites in air conditioned comfort instead of rocking and rolling on a small boat with sea spray getting onto the camera sensor!

THE DIVING

The boat's itinerary varies slightly on each trip taking into account tides and currents to ensure that the sites are dived at the most productive time. We ran a 5 day 6 night cruise leaving Tarakan on a Friday night, having 5 full days of diving (4 dives per day) returning to Tarakan on a Thursday



morning. Dive times are normally around the one hour mark, but not limited, so for those good on air 1 _ hours is feasible and even longer on the shallow jetty dives of Derawan. This means an un-hurried dive, allowing photographers to take their time and concentrate on the getting 'the shot'. Below are my favorite Dive Sites at each of the islands, but there are many others especially around Maratua, the largest of the four islands.

DERAWAN

Tuturuga is a sloping patchy reef which levels off to sand at around 20-22m on the southern side of Derawan. Descend up-current along the coastline down to the sand then follow the reef along until you come to a large purple Sea Fan that has a family of Pygmy Seahorses living in it. Then gradually work along the reef coming shallower finishing the dive around one of the two jetties. Many exotic and different macro subjects can be found here.

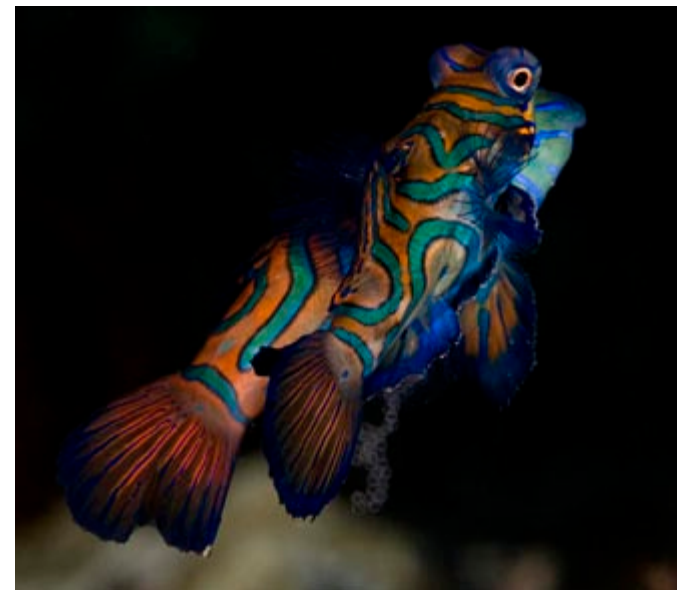
Coral Garden is another sloping reef that levels off to sand at around 12-15m on the eastern side of Derawan. Start the dive at the reef top descending down to 10m working your way east to a coral bommery where you can see Purple Hairy Squat Lobsters in a Barrel Sponge, Whip Coral Shrimps, juvenile Frogfish, Leaf Scorpionfish and a Honeycombe Moray adorned with cleaner shrimps. As you go a little deeper you can find Flying Gurnard and various species of Goby in the sand, including Black Sailfin and Rayed Shrimp Gobies. Working a little shallower you come to a broken coral and weedy bottom that is great for various species of Nudibranchs and Flatworms, plus a group of resident Flasher Wrasse are here where you can witness the males putting on a very colourful courtship display to the females, chasing them around 'flashing' their brightly patterned dorsal and anal fins. Finishing the dive you can see Jawfish in their burrows, Cuttlefish, Green Turtles and a myriad of different reef fishes as you ascend to the reef top at 5m for your safety stop.

Beach Cafe Jetty is a sunset/night dive not to be missed in shallow water enabling long leisurely dives. Start in 8m at sunset to watch the mating ritual of the colourful Mandarinfish – wait besides



their Staghorn Coral home for the males to flirt with the females before a pair slowly rise up above the coral together, release their gametes and disappear back into their branching coral abode. You may be lucky and get them in a good mode and see them mate 10 times or more. When the action is over you can hunt for critters both around and underneath the jetty. A great macro dive for photographers – I regularly spent 2 hours underwater here searching the debris for the weird and wonderful!

Derawan has a large population of the mouth brooding Jawfish and approximately 7-8 days after the full moon the eggs hatch. Just as the sun is rising between 5.30 and 6.00 am, the Jawfish spit out their hatchlings into the current to be swept away and begin life. An early start is obviously required, so hitting the water at 5.00 am is the norm to locate the markers the guides placed the previous day. Get yourself settled by the hole of the Jawfish, position your strobes and focus light (not too bright as it can stop the hatching) and wait for the action to start.



If you're lucky, you will witness what few people have and see the birth of these few millimeter long hatchlings!

SANGALAKI

Manta Parade, as the name suggests this is a great site for Manta Rays, but also there is a high chance of encountering Leopard Sharks, Green Turtles and Marble Rays, together with the huge variety of Reef Fishes that live amongst the abundance of hard corals. Start the dive in the sandy channel in 17m with the current pulling you east to a shallower sandy area, checking out the various cleaning stations as you drift along. On a good day the Manta's queue up at the stations politely taking their turn to be cleaned. When a Manta is seen stay low slowly working towards it to witness the Blue-Streaked Cleaner Wrasse going about their business on these huge fish - an unforgettable sight. Also, keep looking up towards the surface, as they are



regularly seen lined up feeding on plankton.

Manta Cleaning Station is similar to Manta Parade but a little bit further north from Sangalaki so a slightly deeper average depth to the dive. Again drift east with the current checking out the various cleaning stations looking for the Manta's, plus also a chance of encountering Eagle Rays, White-Tip and Black-Tip Reef Sharks and maybe even mating Green Turtles. Watch as two of three of these giant turtles are stacked on top of each other with numerous suitors waiting around the edge of the action.

Manta Run is a great drift dive on the west side of Sangalaki heading south with the current that sometimes can be quite strong. Start in 8m maybe seeing Leopard or White-Tip Reef Sharks resting on the bottom, then let the current pull you along for 15-20 minutes until the topography changes from various species of hard corals to sand and gets a little deeper. This is the area for the cleaning stations and best chance of seeing Manta's on the upcoming tide in the afternoon. Keeping low on the bottom and wait by the cleaning stations for the Manta's to appear from down-current, effortlessly



swimming towards you on its way to the cleaning station for its daily service. A good dive here can produce numerous sightings and is an awesome experience not to be missed!

MARATUA

Mid Reef is on the western side of Maratua which is a great drift dive and you have the possibility of seeing Thresher Sharks. The sloping wall goes down to 45-50m before it levels off to a sand/rubble bottom. Drop down to about 30-35m and let the current pull you along while keeping your eye out below for these majestic elasmobranchs. After 10 minutes of staying deep,

once you have passed the cleaning station, move shallower and back closer to the wall before the current picks up and pulls you off the site. Now turn your attention to the smaller critters that live here, as you can find three different species of Pygmy Seahorses (Bargibanti, Denise and Pontohti) together with many different Nudibranchs, Flatworms, Leaf Scorpionfish, Porcelain Crabs, Flasher Wrasse and much more. You can also see groups of Bumphead Parrotfish and loads of Turtles, both Green and Hawksbill. Finish your dive at 5m on the reef top and you may see schooling Big-Eye Trevally. A great site for both wide angle and macro photography, posing a dilemma in how to set up your camera!

The Channel is an awesome drift on the eastern side of Maratua going into the lagoon formed by the island itself and the coral reef system. Start the dive on the wall up-current from the channel opening; a negative entry and quick descent is needed to stop you getting swept over the reef flats! Level off at 25m and let the current pull you towards the channel opening and, as you approach, get ready to hold on or attach your reef hook. Look out into the blue for the chance of seeing pelagic life on an early morning dive. Move along the channel entrance to find the Blackfin Barracuda, where they school in there thousands, forming amazing shapes and formations in the current. Occasionally joined by large schools of Big-Eye Trevally and Midnight Snapper the school can be so dense that it blocks out the sunlight. If the current eases off they may move into the channel entrance at around 15-18m and form a 'tornado' making the perfect photograph. You either spend all your dive here and then do you safety stop drifting back into the lagoon at a rate of knots or if you have air remaining stay at



17m and head into the lagoon to a trench where it is common to see Eagle Rays, sometimes in schools of 10 or more. End the dive with an adrenalin filled ride on the safety stop as the current increases in the shallows as you get further into the lagoon, but watch out for the whirlpools that are formed by the strong currents that have the tenders spinning on the surface as they pick you up! An unforgettable dive that you will definitely want to do more than once!

Lighthouse is on the northern tip of Maratua. This site can be prone to currents, so is normally dived on the slack water letting you have a relaxing dive hunting for macro subjects. The sloping reef drops down to 45-50m and is dotted with Sea Fans where you can regularly find Denise Pygmy Seahorses. On the wall it is possible to see the rarer Pontohei Pygmy Seahorse, together with many different Nudibranchs, Longnose Hawkfish, Fire and Decorated Dartfish, plus sometimes Dogtooth Tuna, Blackfin Barracuda and Spanish Mackerel in the blue. As you end the dive in the shallows you can regularly see juvenile Rockmover Wrasse, Leaf



Scorpionfish and Ribbon Eels.

Lumantan and Macronesia are two great wall dives which are next to each other on the eastern side of Maratua a few Kilometres down the coast from Lighthouse. The wall drops well out of diving range and are covered in Sea Fans where Denise Pygmy Seahorses are commonly sighted. Also many different Nudibranch species can be found together with Sailfin and Tangaroa Shrimpgoby's, Fire and Decorated Dartfish, Leaf Scorpionfish, as well as Porcelain and Orang-utan Crabs in Anemones. There are occasional sightings of Reef and Leopard Sharks, Marble Rays, Dogtooth Tuna and Spanish Mackerel if you take your eye off the wall and look into the blue every now and then.

KAKABAN

Corner Wall is a great wall dive offering lots of macro subjects. Start deep at around 30m to see the Decorated Dartfish (Purple Fire Goby)



which are plentiful here, then ascend a bit to see if you can find any Denise Pygmy Seahorses in the numerous Sea Fans that adorn the wall. Look for the many species of Nudibranchs, Orang-utan Crabs, Longnose Hawkfish, Fire Dartfish, Square Spot Anthias and Flasher Wrasse. Maybe see a cruising Leopard Shark, Dogtooth Tuna or Spanish Mackerel in the blue. Finish your dive coming into the shallows where you can see Spine Cheek Aneomefish, Moray Eels, Leaf Scorpionfish and Ribbon Eels amongst the expanse of hard corals at the reef top.

Gorgonian Forest is on the other side of Kakaban and is a nice wall dive where you drift



slowly along with the mild current admiring the expanse of Gorgonian Sea Fans that adorn the wall which drops into the depths below. There is a good chance of finding Denise Pygmy Seahorses, as well as many other macro subjects. The slightly colder water at Kakaban means there is always the chance of Scalloped Hammerheads coming up from the deep, so keep one eye on the blue!

Kakaban is most famous for the isolated marine lake in its interior and is a similar environment to Palau, however all of our guests that had been to both rated Kakaban well ahead of Palau.

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Commonly known as Jellyfish Lake, thousands of years ago the island was naturally uplifted which isolated the marine ecosystem from the surrounding sea allowing this marine lake to become very unique and endemic creatures such as four species of non-stinging jellyfishes and non-stinging anemones to evolve. Marine biologists have also found a number of unknown species of anemones, tunicates, flatworms and crustaceans in the lake. There are also Gobies, Cardinalfish, Needlefish and sometimes Sea Snakes in the lake. The shoreline is fringed with a tangle of mangroves and their roots

are carpeted with sponges, seaweeds and tunicates. Visibility is around 10-12 meters (unless the silty bottom is disturbed) and at its deepest point the lake is around 18 meters with tidal variation of about 0.2m, which is a result of a network of underground fissures that connect to the ocean. This truly is a biological paradise where everything can easily be seen on snorkel.

To sum up, this area is a very pristine environment having only a limited number of divers and offers a great mix of both macro subjects and wide angle options. From the minute Bumble-Bee Shrimps and Pygmy Seahorses to the majestic Manta's of Sangalaki and the thousand plus school of Barracuda at The Channel you will be spoilt for choice and come home with a hard drive packed full of memorable images. For more information on prices, dates, etc., for the 2009 season, plus how to get there, visit www.panunee.com.

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