

Flores and Bali

Contrasts in Indonesia

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Planning a recent trip to Indonesia we wanted to do two different dive destinations. Bali was high on our list, so that decision was easy, but for our second location we picked a more obscure and little known destination, the island of Flores. The diving and range of photographic subjects were brilliant at both sites, but the differences between the two destinations made for some interesting comparisons.

Bali is of course well known amongst divers, a very popular island for tourists it attracts millions of visitors each year that come to shop, surf, dive or just relax on the beautiful beaches. Flores on the other hand, located 500km east of Bali, is less well known and only receives a handful of visitors each year in comparison. Most of these tourists come to Flores to see its volcanos, the famous coloured volcanic lakes at Keli Mutu and traditional villages. Very few divers visit Flores, most only use it as a jump off point to explore its famous neighbour, Komodo. But this wasn't always the case as in the 1980s Flores was a popular dive destination, however that all changed in 1992 when the island was devastated by an earthquake and tsunami, which killed over two thousand and virtually destroyed the dive industry.

But the tsunami had little real impact on Flores's dive sites, so we booked a week on the island staying at Sea World Club, a dive resort established in 1976. The resort is located twenty



Beach hut accommodation at Sea World Club, Flores



The rugged coastline of Nusa Penida, Bali and just a few of the dive boats at Manta Point, Bali



The new Liberty Dive Resort, Tulamben, Bali

Giant volcano sponges are typical on the wall dives at Flores, Nikon D90, Ikelite Housing, Tokina 10-17mm lens, 180, f8, ISO 200 and single Inon Z240 strobe



A confusing mass of divers looking for mola mola at Crystal Bay, Nusa Penida, Bali, Canon IXUS 110

minutes east of Maumere, a small town on the north east corner of the island, and is very secluded, with lovely beach bungalows set amongst the palm trees. Our week of diving was to be in and around Maumere Bay, which is ringed by islands and offers reef dives, muck dives and one shipwreck. For the week we dived Flores we did a combination of boat dives to the outer islands and shore dives on the house reef and muck sites, and apart from the first day, we were the only divers staying at the resort. This is not a reflection of the quality of the diving, far from it, more the fact that very few divers know about Flores.

This was in stark contrast to Bali, where we spent four days shore diving at Tulamben, with Liberty Dive Resort, and two days at Padang Bai, diving out at Nusa Penida with Aquamarine Diving. Both these destinations, on Bali's east coast, are well known and extremely popular with divers. At



Helen with a bumphead parrotfish, early in the morning on the USAT Liberty wreck, Tulamben, Bali, Nikon D90, Ikelite Housing, Tokina 10-17mm lens, 1/100, f7.1, ISO 200 and single Inon Z240 strobe

Tulamben we not only had another dozen divers staying at the same dive resort, but had to contend with several hundred divers staying at nearby resorts, and several more hundred that visit the dive sites each day on day trips. That's a lot of divers in the water on only a handful of dive sites!

We also had to contend with the same sort of problem at Nusa Penida, we were hoping to see a mola mola, but so was everyone else, meaning lots of divers. It is hard to complain about the number of divers, as these are very popular dive sites and we were just another couple of masks in the crowd. Also on most dives this wasn't a problem, but at times the volume and behaviour of some of the divers did deter from enjoying the experience. Let's look at a comparison in the diving between Flores and Bali.



Shrimp goby on the muddy bottom at the Wairterang wreck, Flores, Nikon D90, Ikelite Housing, Tokina 10-17mm lens, 1/100, f11, ISO 200 and single Inon Z240 strobe

REEF DIVING

The reef diving at Flores was superb and mainly done around the offshore islands that fringe Maumere Bay. All these reefs featured walls dropping from 6m to 200m, and are decorated with gorgonians, soft corals, black corals, sea whips and some giant sponges. At Besar Island we dived walls at Margajong, Ruteng and Taat, and saw a nice variety of reef fish, reef sharks, quiet a few pelagic fish and a surprising number of turtles, but they were all a little camera shy. At nearby Babi Island the walls were riddled with caves and home to dozens of batfish. All these walls were great for wide angle photography, but a little poor in macro subjects.

The reefs fringing the main island on the other

hand were much better for macro photography. Here we dived walls and coral gardens. At Wair Gete we found mantis shrimps, moray eels, sea stars, nudibranchs, a variety of anemonefish, crayfish and a very photogenic cuttlefish. While at Tanjung Dart there were dozens of blue spotted lagoon rays, reef sharks, trevally and a lovely group of shrimpfish dancing above a gorgonian. On all the reef dives at Flores we enjoyed 30m visibility and 28C degree water.

The reef dives at Tulamben, at the Coral Gardens and The Drop-off, were also good, with some lovely corals, although the Coral Gardens could also be classified as a muck site. We concentrated on macro photography at these reefs, finding a wide range of reef fish and invertebrate species. The visibility was not as good as Flores, around 15m, and we didn't even attempt wide angle, as there were just too many bubbles from other divers, but the macro subjects were endless; shrimps, long-nose hawkfish, nudibranchs, crabs, octopus, cuttlefish, ghost pipefish, moray eels and an amazing amount of blue ribbon eels. Even though we enjoyed the dives at both sites, we didn't enjoy the behaviour of some divers, with people not waiting their turn to photograph a subject, just barging in.

The big surprise was the quality

of the reef dives at Nusa Penida. We had booked here to see a mola mola, but were more impressed with the reef dives we did, great corals and fewer divers. Nusa Penida sits in the Lombok Channel and is constantly washed by strong currents and upwellings, perfect conditions for corals to flourish, but the water can be cool, 19C to 22C degrees, but also very clear, with 30m visibility. We did reef dives on coral gardens and walls at Bett Point and Gamat Bay, with both sites having beautiful soft corals, sponges, sea whips and gorgonians. With the wide angle lens on, as hoping to see mola mola, the reefs delivered some good photo opportunities. At Bett Point we found abundant reef fish and numerous pelagic species, but the highlights were a banded sea snake, a lovely giant anglerfish and a surprise visit by a mola mola. While at Gamat Bay we saw moray eels, scorpionfish, giant trevally and masses of reef fish.

Diving the most popular dive sites at Nusa Penida, Manta Point and Crystal Bay was a little disappointing. The dive sites were very crowded, a dozen dive boats all throwing in divers at the same time, and there must have been a hundred divers in the water at Manta Point. We did see four manta rays, but they didn't come close to any of the divers, who could blame them. The visibility was also poor at Manta Point at 12m,



Radiant soft coral at the drop off at Bett Point, Nusa Penida, Bali, Nikon D90, Ikelite Housing, Tokina 10-17mm lens, 1/100, f8, ISO 200 and single Inon Z240 strobe

and the coral gardens were not very colourful, so not much else to look at if you couldn't see a manta ray. While at Crystal Bay, the main mola mola site, the corals were superb, because of the currents, and we saw a sea snake, a marble ray and plenty of reef and pelagic fish. But we also had to contend with over crowding, dozens of divers one day and no mola mola. Fortunately when we did see two mola mola we were in a small group with no other divers around. Not the best experience, but we did get to see these amazing fish, if only for a minute. The

dive operators really need to stagger the divers at these sites, but with the tricky currents it can be difficult.

MUCK DIVING

The muck diving at Flores was a bit of a mixed bag. Potentially there are some great muck diving sites here, and we did see an interesting range of critters, but the dive guides at Sea World Club generally get few requests for muck diving, as most of the visiting divers don't realise there is any available. Even so, at



A pair of porcelain crabs on the Sea World Club House Reef, Flores, Nikon D90, Ikelite Housing, 60mm lens, 1/125, f13, ISO 200 and single Inon Z240 strobe



Harlequin shrimps are common at Seyara Secrets, Tulamben, Bali, Nikon D90, Ikelite Housing, 60mm lens, 1/125, f13, ISO 200 and single Inon Z240 strobe



A giant anglerfish at Bett Point, Nusa Penida, Bali, Nikon D90, Ikelite Housing, Tokina 10-17mm lens, 1/125, f8, ISO 200 and single Inon Z240 strobe

Old Ankermi Muck, Wair Blerer and Nangahale we dived on back sand/mud and found imperial shrimps on sea cucumbers, anemones, pipefish, shrimpfish, nudibranchs, a sea horse, a stargazer, bobbit worms, scorpionfish, a demon stinger, mantis shrimps and plenty of shrimp gobies. At most of these sites there were adjoining coral gardens, where we found a good number of blue ribbon eels.

The best muck diving site at Flores was right in front of the Sea World Club on the black sand and the house reef. Here we found a burrowing snake eel, a shaggy anglerfish, moray eels, ghost pipefish, shrimpfish, nudibranchs, garden eels, sea stars, pipefish, porcelain crabs, cuttlefish, stingrays, lionfish and more blue ribbon eels.

While there is no muck diving at Nusa Penida, Tulamben is famous for its muck and Seraya Secrets ended up being our favourite dive site, great critters and few divers. On the black sand here we saw harlequin shrimps, crinoid shrimps,



A swimming crab shelters under an anemone at the USAT Liberty wreck, Tulamben, Bali, Nikon D90, Ikelite Housing, 60mm lens, 1/100, f11, ISO 200 and single Inon Z240 strobe



Ribbon sweetlips at home on the USAT Liberty wreck, Tulamben, Bali, Nikon D90, Ikelite Housing, Tokina 10-17mm lens, 1/80, f8, ISO 200 and single Inon Z240 strobe



Exploring the Wairterang wreck, Flores, Nikon D90, Ikelite Housing, Tokina 10-17mm lens, 1/50, f7.1, ISO 200 and single Inon Z240 strobe

hairy squat lobsters, orang-utan crabs, dragonets, painted anglerfish, ghost pipefish, mantis shrimps, nudibranchs, shrimpfish, a snake eel, jawfish and many other species. Of course having a good guide, that knows the site like the back of his hand, was an invaluable asset, and our guide Jink from Liberty Dive Resort, knew where every critter was before entering the water.

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Sea World Club dive boat on the beach at Flores

WRECK DIVING

The USAT Liberty wreck is without doubt the number one dive site in Bali, if not the whole of Indonesia. And it certainly lived up to its reputation. Unfortunately, it is also swamped by divers daily, most arriving on day trips, so we found the best time to dive the wreck was very early in the morning. These early morning dives were just magic. The 120m long wreck lies in 5m to 27m parallel to the shore and is covered in coral and reef fish. And as much fun as it was to explore the holds and other parts of the wreck, the highlight was the marine life attracted to the ship. From schools of trevally to pygmy sea horses, the USAT Liberty wreck has it all. Reef sharks, barracuda, groupers, ghost pipefish, leaf scorpionfish, garden eels, batfish,



Dive boats and fishing boats pack the bay at Pandang Bai, Bali

sweetlips, angelfish, but the best were the bumphead parrotfish that sleep on the wreck. We shot both wide angle and macro on this wonderful wreck and were never short of subjects.

We had heard there was a small wreck off Flores before we arrived so were keen to check it out. The Wairterang Wreck rests in a sheltered cove and is accessible from the shore, lying in 13m to 32m. The 50m long wreck is thought to be a tank landing ship sunk during World War Two. The wreck is pretty broken up, with a sparse covering of corals, but is a haven for marine life. Gropers, batfish, pipefish, rock cod, lionfish, triggerfish, sweetlips and rabbitfish were just some of the species we saw. A school of trevally cruises above the wreck and invertebrate species abound, including shrimps and nudibranchs. We enjoyed this



The towering Mount Agung, Tulamben, Bali

wreck so much, even with only 12m visibility, that we dived it twice.

Overall we enjoyed all the dives we did in Bali and Flores and came home with a wonderful collection of images. Both areas have good and bad points, but we were glad we had split our time between the two destinations, as it gave us a more rounded holiday, with a little bit of everything.

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More information about Flores
www.sea-world-club.com

More information about Tulamben
www.libertydiveresort.com

More information about Nusa Penida
www.aquamarinediving.com

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