

Tulamben Wreck Divers

by Ken Hoppen

Several years ago I did a trip to Komodo in Indonesia, and spent five or so days in Bali on the return leg, with the idea of taking some topside shots of the touristy areas of Bali. Whilst I achieved this, I must admit that I was a little bored with the whole Kuta/Legion lifestyle. Not really my thing. I did wonder what the diving was like, but hadn't done my 'homework', so didn't do any dives whilst I was here.

What a waste of time that was.

A couple of years ago I saw some photos taken in Bali from a friend of mine, and they made me begin to wonder what I had missed.

Just last month I managed to return, and I must say that not only did I see just about everything I was hoping too, I wound up with much, much, more than I expected!

Tony and Dot Medcraft and Wayan Ambek of Tulamben Wreck Divers were kind enough to invite me across, so across I went, macro lenses in hand, to see if the shots I had been seeing were really there.

Tulamben is a small village on the north-east side of Bali, which would have to my guestmate about 600-800 people living there, all

dependant on the divers that visit the area. Tulamben Wreck Divers will arrange pickup to and from the airport in Denpasar, making getting here extremely easy. I was picked up at about 2am, so there is not much they won't do for you to make your stay easy. Tulamben is about a two and a half hour drive north-east from the airport, so I don't really suggest you should arrive at 2am.

Tulamben Wreck Divers is perfectly placed. There are about seven rooms at the dive shop resort, starting at about US\$20 per night, and all are very well furnished with air conditioning, a fridge, etc, as well as being very nice indeed. Think very good standard motel rooms. On top of that there is a swimming pool and community area, and you are only a short walk from the dive shop, where you kit up for the dives. For those who come in a small group, there are villas to rent about 500m up the road, which not only have their own pool, but overlook the water, and are very high-quality living at a budget price. They are definitely worth checking out!



This great barracuda is another early morning resident of the USAT Liberty wreck. Nikon D200, Aquatica housing, twin Ikelite DS125 strobes, Tamron 12-24mm lens, 1/125s, f5.6

In the two hundred or so metres of Tulamben there are several restaurants and souvenir shops, and whilst you do get a couple of hawkers floating around, it is not so in-your-face as in other more built-up Bali areas. This place is for divers!

The Diving

Diving here is predominantly from the shore. There are several sites to choose from, and all have a vast array of things to see. Your gear is kept down at the shop, and you are

allocated a dive guide. Now before you say that you do not need a guide, let me say that leading you around by the nose is not their function. They organise your gear, organise it to be taken to the dive site, and work out what you want to see. You can choose how long you want to dive for, if you see something you are interested in you simply stay there and observe it for as long as you wish, the dive guide is there to make your dives enjoyable. The best thing about them is that they know where things are, and are happy

to point them out! Wayan was my dive guide for my trip, and I can confidently say that without him I would only have managed about 1/10th of the photos that I had in the end. I think he has six pairs of eyes, he found so much stuff that I would have overlooked! By the time I had finished on my first photographic subject for the dive, he had already found the next one, and was hunting for the third. I spent my time going from one great creature to the next, no waiting!!

Special mention has to be made to the porters here too. A short walk from the diveshop to the divesite is required, about 75m to maybe 200m depending on which site you want to dive. You do not need to carry your gear though. Local porters take it down, and bring it back, for you. There is a few ways this happens, but the most spectacular is when the ladies put your tank on their heads. Some even manage two sets! How they do this is a mystery to me, and may it remain so!

USAT Liberty Wreck

There are three main sites at Tulamben, and this is the most famous. About 75m from the shop is the Liberty Wreck, a short step off the beach. From about 3m to about 30m of depth, this 120m long WWII wreck dominates the sandy slope. Torpedoed in 1942, it was run ashore to prevent it from sinking. In 1963 however, a volcanic eruption from nearby Mt Agung destroyed a lot of this area, killed over 1000 people, and pushed this wreck into the water. It is now considered to be in the top ten wreck dives in the world, and is probably the world's most accessible shipwreck. It is simply brilliant, and full of life. If you can look past the giant barracuda, giant trevally, bumphead parrotfish and giant maori wrasse, and push your way through



(Above) The USAT Liberty wreck is considered one of the ten best in the world, and probably the most accessible.

Nikon D200, Aquatica housing, twin Ikelite DS125 strobes, Tamron 12-24mm lens, 1/125s, f8

(Top left) A large school of bumphead parrotfish are found on the wreck early each morning. Getting there before the hordes later in the day is best, so staying close to the site is a must!

Nikon D200, Aquatica housing, twin Ikelite DS125 strobes, Tamron 12-24mm lens, 1/125s, f8

(Right) Spectacular life abounds on the wreck. Combine this with great vis, and a depth between 4 and 30m, and it is a dive site you can dive on for many a trip!

Nikon D200, Aquatica housing, twin Ikelite DS125 strobes, Tamron 12-24mm lens, 1/125s, f5.6



the large school of bigeye trevally, you start seeing garden eels, ghost pipefish, mantis shrimp, pygmy seahorses, and jawfish. The life in this area is just astounding. The best time of day to dive here is in the early morning, and Tulamben Wreck Divers are perfectly placed to do this. Other dive places

start coming in mid to late morning, and there can be quite a few divers. A 7am dive removes this problem, and enables you to view the wrecks larger inhabitants.



The critter life in the area is simply spectacular. One creature I was not expecting was this wonderpus octopus. Nikon D200, Aquatica housing, twin Ikelite DS125 strobes, Nikon 105mm lens, 1/125s, f16

The Coral Gardens

A little to the south of the wreck is the Coral Gardens, a long dive on a volcanic sand slope that takes about three dives to cover fully. There are some artificial reefs in the shallows here, and more fish and critter life than you can imagine. You would be hard pressed to exhaust this as a dive site, and we had some wonderful encounters here, with the best probably being a wonderpus octopus. This really is a strange creature. I think you might find this little octopus is very poisonous, it seemed to have that air of confidence a blue-ringed octopus has about it. The sort of look-but-don't-touch air of invulnerability. If you get to see one, check out the eyes. They pulse with a sort of hypnotic suggestion about them. Very spectacular!

The Drop Off

The furthest walk, taking all of around three or four minutes, the sand slope here drops off steeply,



Several species of mantis shrimp are commonly found around the wreck. Nikon D200, Aquatica housing, twin Ikelite DS125 strobes, Nikon 105mm lens, 1/125s, f16

and eventually leads around to a coral reef. This place is home to many cleaner shrimp, morays, Denice's pygmy seahorse, shrimp with their lookout gobies, angelfish, butterflyfish, leaf scorpionfish, and so much more, all with that black sand volcanic background that makes the area special. None of the dives here are your typical hard coral reef, but they more than make up for that in the diversity of life that can be found here. Creatures that I have only glimpsed in the dark recesses of caves and overhangs on the Great Barrier Reef wander about freely here. Keyhole angelfish flit about, one of maybe a dozen species going about their business. Saron shrimp poke out from a hole in the rocks. Masses of Durban shrimp surround cleaner shrimp, all waiting for a fishy customer. A young great barracuda flits about in the shallows, whilst a starry moray wanders past the anglerfish I was shooting. There is just so much life here!

This is just the start of what Tulamben Wreck

Divers have to offer, within ten minutes by car are several other sites, including Seraya Secrets, which are amazingly different to the diving at Tulamben, even though they are just a few kilometres away. This is a must-see dive destination for those of us who love to observe marine life in its multitudes, and see some of the strange creatures that live in it. It is a macro photographers paradise, and the number of people whom I met there that were on their second, third and fourth visits to the place just confirms its standing as the place to be to see a wide range of spectacular creatures!

Ken Hoppen

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