

Back to Bali - USAT Liberty

By Mark Webster

Those of you who read UWP regularly will know that I have written about Bali before. It is a destination that I have visited quite frequently, only beaten by my very numerous visits to the Red Sea. Bali is often seen predominantly as a starting point for live aboard trips to perhaps more exotic destinations in Indonesia, but it does have tremendous diving in its own right.

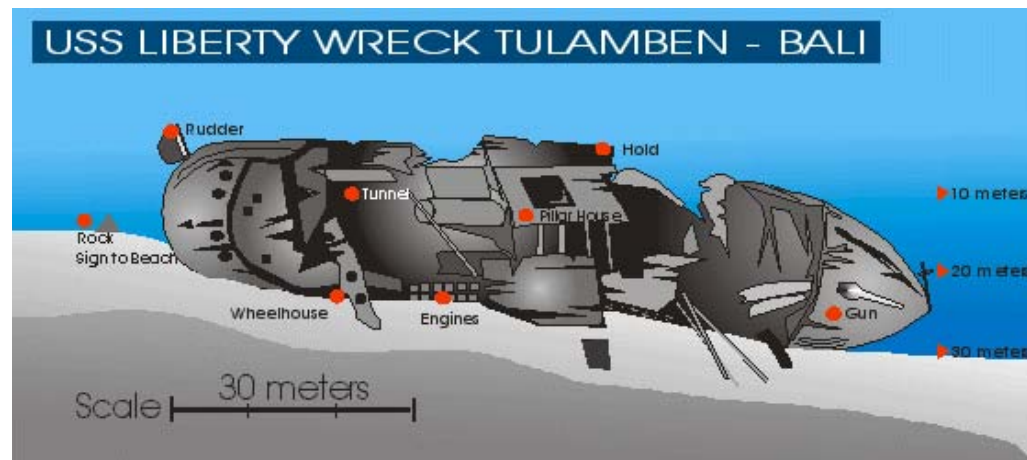
There are numerous dive sites, onshore and offshore, spread around the island which can replicate almost all the reef fauna and weird critters that you will encounter at remote locations. Sometimes the reefs are on a smaller scale and you may need to move around the island a little to experience the best muck sites, but in general it would be hard to be disappointed with Bali as a photographer.

The other added benefit of the island is its natural beauty and the various cultural distractions and other excursions that can keep your spouse amused if she/he is not totally obsessed with underwater photography (difficult to imagine I know, but these creatures do exist...).

So we have been back to Bali again only this time included stays in three locations (one for the culture) to dive the best sites without having to make long daily transits by road to reach the more northern sites on the island. There are a lot of dive centres in the south of the island that will offer daily trips to the sites in the north west and north east of the island, but the disadvantage is the long drives of 2-3 hours to reach the dive sites. It is far better to stay on location which also allows you to maximise an unlimited dive package. So the purpose of this piece is to offer

(Right) Beach diving at Tulamben could not be easier. Select your dive site and one of the local porters will take your scuba kit to the entry point and collect it after the dive. Effortless! Nikon D200, 18-200mm zoom, ISO100, programme mode.

(Far right) The central part of the wreck is partly collapsed but there are still substantial areas that allow easy access and also some natural light to penetrate. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO200, f11 1/60.



The USAT Liberty is a big ship wreck and will take several dives to familiarise yourself with all the major features. This is worthwhile as it will allow you to plan subsequent dives and imaging opportunities more easily.





There are many opportunities to use the shape of the wreckage to frame a diver and include a blue water background. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO200, f11 1/60.

a few musings and an insight of what to expect if you are planning a similar trip.

Our trip was split between the Pemuteran area in the north west, which put us close to Menangan island with its colourful coral walls and coastal dives and also within 30-40 minutes drive to both Secret Bay and Puri Jati which have become known as the must do sites for muck diving enthusiasts. We stayed at the Mimpri resort close to the village of Pejarakan which I can thoroughly recommend as having exotic landscaping, nicely appointed accommodation and a well managed dive centre.

From Pemuteran we transferred to perhaps the best known area of Tulamben on the north east coast to our favourite Tauch Terminal resort which is situated right in the middle of Tulamben bay in front of the coral garden and a short walk from the famous USAT Liberty wreck. Tulamben offers a happy mix of almost everything whilst the wreck



There are numerous species of colourful fish on the wreck like this oriental sweetlips. Most are co-operative so it is worth being a little patient and looking for suitable negative space behind your subject. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO200, f11 1/60.

itself is stunning and deserves many dives to get the best from it photographically. The remainder of the bay has coral gardens, muck, a wall dive and a number of artificial structures to keep your wide and macro needs fulfilled. A short hop out of the bay by Jukung (small outrigger fishing boats which must be tried) are numerous other sites with a mix of topography and the well known site of Seraya Secrets if you want pure muck again. We also include in our itinerary a trip just down the coast to Amed for Jemeluk bay and Lipah bay which is home to the Japanese wreck and perhaps the prettiest and richest shallow water reef that I have seen in Bali.

Even with all this variety we chose to spend the majority of our dives on the USSAT Liberty wreck and the purpose of this short article is really



The famous school of jacks are normally resident on the wreck but will only begin to spiral when there is a little current running. If the current is strong then you will generally find them turning gently above the stern of the wreck. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO200, f11 1/60.

to describe what makes it so unique and attractive to a photographer. But first of all a bit of history to tell you how this wreck comes to be in such an unusual location.

The USAT Liberty was launched on 19 June 1918 by the Federal Shipbuilding Company in Kearny, New Jersey, USA and was quickly commissioned for military service during the First World War during which time she operated between the USA and France carrying cargoes of war materials, horses and munitions whilst successfully avoiding an attack by U boats. Between the wars the Liberty sailed as a packet ship on numerous routes but was commandeered once again in 1940 soon after the Second World War began.

The ship began operations in the Pacific region and in January 1942 was en route from Australia to the Philippines with a cargo of railway parts and rubber. On 11 January, she was torpedoed by Japanese submarine I-166 some 10 nautical miles (19 km) southwest of the Lombok Strait. Although the ship was taking in water there was hope she could be saved, so she was taken in tow by the US destroyer Paul Jones and Dutch destroyer Van Ghent in an attempt to tow her to the port of Singaraja on Bali for repairs. However the ship began to sink more quickly and was

eventually beached at Tulamben in order to salvage as much as possible. Once the US forces had finished with her the ship was left to the locals who made good use of the materials and fittings on the ship over the years until 1963 when nearby the volcano mount Angung erupted spectacularly during February and March and the combination of huge tremors and lava flows pushed the ship from the shoreline to where she now lies on a gently sloping seabed. The eruption was a disaster locally with many lives lost but the legacy today is a wonderful wreck dive which has spawned a successful tourist industry in Tulamben which benefits the whole area.

This has to rank as one of the best shore dives worldwide and the only downside for some are the boulders and pebbles that make up the beach which can make the entry a little interesting especially if you do not have stout diving boots. They can be slippery and awkward when you are also toting a heavy camera rig, so you should also take extra care not to take a tumble. However, after the first couple of entries it is a lot easier and once you are 5m or so from the shore the stones give way to dark sand. From here it is a short fin of 30m or so before you see the stern looming up at you which rises to between 6-8m.

Your first dive on this wreck will



One of several leaf scorpion fish on the wreck which moved about quite a bit each day. A subject like this perched on the top of wreckage gives you the opportunity to get in very close with a fish eye zoom. . Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO200, f11 1/25.

provide a few surprises. It is a big ship and although she is somewhat broken in the centre, the stern and bow are very recognisable and largely intact. If your first dive here is early in the morning then you will enjoy the best visibility and you will immediately appreciate the intensity of the coral and invertebrate life covering the stern as you approach it. There is virtually no bare steel to be seen and every reef species that you can imagine is represented here and the scene is alive

with the movement of fish over this enormous artificial reef.

The problem for a photographer is that you will immediately want to stop and begin shooting images no matter what lens you are using. It is difficult, but if you can resist this temptation it is worth dedicating a dive to a tour of the wreck, particularly with a good guide, to get a feel for the layout and variety of habitats. Despite its size, a wreck tour is a reasonably relaxed dive



with opportunity for some shots as you progress and it will help you plan subsequent dives to target certain areas for particular subjects, compositions and techniques. The opportunities for wide angle and macro are seemingly endless.

Swimming the length of the wreck brings you to the deepest point at the bow between 25-30m. The bow itself is intact and has a deck gun which is hard to discern at first due to the spectacular covering of corals sponges and invertebrates. If the visibility is reasonable it is worth swimming off the wreck a little and

increasing your ISO to capture a natural light shot here which will give you a much better impression of the wreck.

There are hundreds of wide angle compositions on the wreck ranging from classic diver and wreck shots, ship features decorated with marine life, isolating some of the vivid fan gorgonian and hard corals, fish and fish schools and a host of close focus opportunities.

The best visibility seems always to be first thing in the morning for a number of reasons. You will also find it the quietest time on the

(Far left) Diver and gorgonian. Even if you do not have a dedicated buddy capturing a diver in the frame is often easy on the wreck as many are being led by guides overhead. Some are very co-operative and can be persuaded to swim around again with a quick hand signal! . Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO200, f11 1/60.

(Left) Most of the morays you encounter have either cleaner wrasse or these candy striped shrimp in attendance. Take your time and wait for the moray to settle and the cleaner to start work to capture the moment. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE, Subtronic Mini flash guns, ISO200, f11 1/60.

wreck before the divers on day trips from the south of the island begin to arrive around 10am. If you can pull yourself out of bed really early, say 6:30 or 7am then you will also have the opportunity of seeing the resident school of bumphead parrot fish queuing up to be cleaned around the stern before they move off across the bay to feed on the reefs. The bumpheads will return at dusk, but are less co-operative then as it is obviously time for bed and they are heading for areas inside the wreck.

Another resident feature is the huge school of jack fish that are

normally around the stern area but do move up and down the wreck during the day. When there is a little current running they will begin to spiral which can make a powerful composition with the sun on the surface, although get the correct exposure with these reflective fish is often a challenge. Occasionally the jack school will move across Tulamben bay and can be found at the opposite end close the wall dive known as the drop off. But I am told that they never leave the bay completely.

There are many subjects suitable for close focus wide angle compositions and if you have the correct equipment you can find plenty of subjects suitable for wide angle macro. Scorpion fish, frog fish, ghost pipefish and numerous species of nudibranch can be found conveniently perched on angled surfaces which allows you to make a low approach and include some background or open water. I spent several happy dives pursuing colourful nudibranchs and a leaf scorpion fish with a 10-17mm zoom and 2X teleconverter which allows a very close approach.

If you like macro photography then you are likely to be overwhelmed with the positive cornucopia of vivid subjects. Getting close to the wreck reveals that almost every surface is covered with hydroids, sea squirts,



A simple subject like a plume worm can make an attractive abstract macro composition. Try to see beyond the whole critter when looking for suitable subjects. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO 100, f18 1/125.

although it may be a gamble to find another photographer in place! Again, dive early to avoid the crowds and also discuss the aims of your fellow photographers in the resort to avoid a clash of interests. There are also other pygmy seahorse locations nearby if you are not successful on the wreck.

You will find many different species of nudibranch feeding amongst the hydroids and sea squirts. You can capture the feeding behaviour and also frequently mating and laying of their delicate spirals of eggs. If you find an egg mass then examine the immediate area carefully as the parents will not be far away and if you are lucky will be laying another clutch of eggs.

Larger subjects are also hosts to smaller subjects so make sure to examine gorgonians, sea whips, clams, anemones, crinoids etc. for gobies, shrimps, squat lobsters and small fish either dwelling symbiotically or seeking protection. You will need life size reproduction for many of these subjects and some may require additional magnification

with a wet lens or teleconverter.

You can also use your macro lens to capture behavioural shots. The wreck is just like any other reef in that there are predators and prey everywhere and something is always on the receiving end of a hunt. Some static hunters, like lizard fish or sand perch are more approachable when they are struggling to consume their prey which can make an interesting image if somewhat macabre if you are a fish lover!

After a couple of days diving the wreck and reviewing your results you can begin to focus on the subjects and techniques that need improvement and also begin to know the location and

best time of day to capture a particular subject. It is difficult to get bored with this dive site and even though we injected variety into our own itinerary there was always the urge to make yet another dive here!

So if you yearn for a little variety with your diving then Bali and Tulamben in particular is a good choice. A week or two here is also a more economic proposition than one of the live boards departing for more exotic locations in Indonesia and you still offer the opportunity to capture most species with your camera.

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sponges and small corals. These make great subjects on their own, but they also provide succour to dozens of nudibranchs in various hues, shelter for small fish and crustaceans and an ideal environment for the camouflage species to exploit as they lie in wait to strike.

If you have never seen a pygmy seahorse, or don't have a picture of one, then there is a resident group of Barbiganti on a gorgonian at the bow of the wreck. This is in around 28m depth, so it is worth planning to dedicate the beginning of a dive here to maximise your bottom time

