

Manado Location Report



by Mark Webster

As underwater photographers we are always seeking new locations to feed our obsession and it seems that never a day goes by without some sage revealing yet another perfect location with endless subjects just waiting for you and your camera. Whilst enduring favourites like the Red Sea and Caribbean still attract us and provide plenty of photo opportunities, a new 'Holy Grail' has emerged in the last couple of years, that of the vast island complex of Indonesia. The attractions of Indonesia have been obvious for quite some time and has been a very popular destination with antipodean divers and more adventurous Europeans and Americans. However it is only relatively recently that UK photographers have begun to travel to the area regularly, but with such a large number of destinations to choose from in the archipelago it is sometimes difficult to make a choice which will give you the desired facilities and photo opportunities. With this in mind I thought it may be useful to pass on some practical guidelines to an area which is emerging as almost ideal in terms of accessibility, diving variety and a splendid selection of subjects to keep even the most ambitious underwater photographer happy.

The location is the northern end of the island of Sulawesi and, although this area is not geared up as a 'tourist destination' in the classic sense, the area around the port town of Manado provides all that a diver will need and some interesting diversions for non divers as well. Travel to Manado is very simple with the most popular route being via Singapore and then onward on a Silk Air connection to the international airport close to the town. There are also connections available via Bali and Jakarta (Silk Air and Garuda) which can make travel arrangements more flexible and enable you to take advantage of reduced air fares. The only drawback for we photographers is the pitiful standard baggage



The Tasik Ria Resort has perhaps the best equipped dive boats for the serious photographer.

Large sea fans reach out into the current on the walls. There are also host to small gobies, crabs and long nosed hawk fish. Nikon F90X, 16mm fish eye, Subal, Isotecnic 33TTL & YS30, Ektachrome EBX, f11 @ 60th.



allowance of 20kg which is barely enough for your diving equipment let alone the essential photographic items. This allowance may be higher if you are flying in from the east (i.e. from the USA or Australia) but it is wise to check the allowance for both flight legs when you book. Some airlines (e.g. Singapore Airlines) do offer an extra 10kg for sports equipment at a reasonable fee but in general, particularly in this prevailing climate of higher security which limits hand baggage, you need to be prepared to bite the bullet and pay for excess weight. Having done this you can check

your bags all the way through to Manado, although I always prefer to confirm that they have been loaded when I check in for the connecting flights!

The secret to the attraction of Manado is the proximity of two totally contrasting marine ecosystems, that of the Bunaken Marine Park and the Lembeh Straits. The Bunaken Marine Park is located on the west coast of the peninsula and provides spectacular classic coral reef and wall diving with a variety of rare and unusual creatures thrown in. The Lembeh Straits are on the east side of the



Traditional local boats are used to ferry divers in the Lembeh Straits. All the beaches feature the same black volcanic sand.



Commensal shrimps are difficult to spot at other locations. Here almost every sea whip has a shrimp or goby at home. Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal, Inon quad flash, Velvia f16 @125th.

peninsula, only 40km away, and offer the alternative of unique muck diving conditions in which a staggering array of rare marine denizens thrive and are reliably found on every dive. So you are literally spoilt for choice and you can choose to split your time between both locations or even change your plans during your stay if you find the lure of one is stronger than the other.

This part of Indonesia is within an area of volcanic activity famously known as the 'Ring of

Fire', which includes big names like Krakatoa which erupted massively in 1883 and more recently Mt. Agung in Bali which did significant damage in 1963. There are many extinct, sleeping and active volcanoes in the region and this has produced some of the spectacular underwater scenery in the Bunaken Marine Park. The proximity of the equator, large tidal range and the intermingling of warm and cool currents propagates high levels of nutrients in the water column which in turn supports the

diverse range of marine life for which this area is now renowned for. The large tidal range can mean that strong currents will prevail on exposed dive sites which is good for big fish activity but not if you want to take macro photographs! So you need to choose a good dive operator who understands the local tidal conditions and the needs of photographers to ensure that you have slack water on the best sites when you need it. Due to the arrangement of the islands in Bunaken there is generally somewhere sheltered from the tide although the currents can do strange things on reef promontory's and even change with depth. Strong currents are also experienced in the Lembeh Straits, but are a little more predictable here and there are sites which are accessible at all states of the tide. Although the currents may occasionally pose a challenge to photography they are of course the reason that the area supports such diverse life forms and so should really be appreciated! However, wherever you choose to dive I would recommend that you carry a "marker sausage" or extendable flag and an air horn on your BC direct feed in case you get carried away with your dive too literally.

There are a variety of diving resorts both north and south of Manado on the west coast which offer varying degrees of comfort. There are also some dive operators based on Bunaken Island which offer a base closer to the diving but without sophisticated facilities. Choosing Bunaken Island as a base would suit those only interested in diving in the marine park and surrounding islands. Most diving centres use local style boats which are stable diving platforms but lack the facilities that you may have come to expect in the Red Sea for example. The one current exception are the boats operated by the Eco Divers, based at the Tasik Ria Resort, which follow the design of a typical Egyptian day boat (constructed in glass fibre) and are



Soft corals are found in vivid colours and will match those found in the Red Sea. Nikon F90X, 16mm fish eye, Subal, Isotecnic 33TTL & YS30, Ektachrome EBX, f11 @ 60th.

very spacious and comfortable. This may be a consideration if you are spending a day at sea and need space for camera preparation. There are some live aboards which operate seasonally but their itineraries generally take them farther afield from this area.

The wall dives in Bunaken have all the features you would expect on a healthy coral reef. The shallow wall tops are dominated by hard corals which are in superb condition in many places, whilst the walls are decorated with large sponges, graceful sea fans, numerous sea whips and vividly coloured soft corals. Intermingled with this are more hard corals and the whole spectacle is populated by exotic Indo Pacific reef fish from tiny gobies on sea whips to herds of grazing bumphead parrot fish in the shallows. The challenge for the photographer is of course not only to capture the obvious species but also those which rely on camouflage for predatory purposes or protection.

Elusive creatures like robust and ornate ghost pipe fish, leaf scorpion fish, stone fish and numerous others can be found by chance but a better bet is to use the skills of a local dive guide who have incredibly sharp eyes and



Every feather star hides a secret. Some are tiny like squat lobsters and shrimps but even the larger tenants, like this harlequin ghost pipe fish, are difficult to spot. Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal, Inon quad flash, Velvia f16 @125th.

The hairy appearance of this crab links by name it to another indigenous land species, the orang-utan. Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal, Inon quad flash, Velvia f16 @125th.



are simply invaluable to your quest. If your taste is for bigger blue water cruisers then there is a chance to see all the usual suspects. Schools of barracuda, trevally jacks, turtles, several species of sharks and apparently

The pigmy seahorse has become a holy grail to photographers visiting the area. These are tiny subjects which need at least 2:1 magnification. Nikon F90X, 105mm + 2X converter, Subal, Inon quad flash, Velvia f16 @125th.

the occasional whale can all appear from the blue or from the depths off the walls.

Closer to the coast off Manado there are numerous shallow water reefs which offer coral formations in conditions which range from very good to rubble either as a result of wave action or from past blast fishing techniques which are now banned. The visibility on the inshore reefs is variable but is rarely as bad as say a UK dive and is more than adequate for tracking down your quarry and close up photography. The attraction of these reefs is the variety of subjects which include those ghost pipe fish again, blue and black ribbon eels, crab blennies, prawn gobies and their partners, mantis shrimps, snake eels and frog fish in various hues. You will also find that prized macro subject, the pigmy sea horse, which will definitely need the help of a guide to find and will astound you when you see just how small and well camouflaged they are. I made a long decompression dive on a reef close to the Tasik Ria Resort where a large sea fan sports at least five of the creatures. I was only able to see and photograph two of them and that was challenge enough as they will only partially fill a frame at 2:1! These coastal reefs are also excellent for night diving when a whole new cast of characters will emerge. Twin spot and dwarf lion fish, juvenile cuttle fish and squid, crabs and squat lobsters in soft and hard corals, leaf scorpion fish and a whole cast of sleeping fish will soon consume your film.

Your first impression of the Lembeh Straits may be one of disappointment as you descend in often gloomy vis onto a dark volcanic sand or rubble bottom



which might appear lifeless. However, all is not what it seems and you will soon realise that there is amazing variety here, but it all very well camouflaged. This area has of course received a boost from the release of a book by Constantinos Petrinos, the 'Realm of the Pigmy Seahorse'. Whilst these awkward little devils can also be found here this symbol represents only a fraction of the macro treasures you will find. Once again, you will need the help of an experienced guide to make sure you get the best from your dives. After several weeks here you may well begin to spot the more unusual species for yourself, but most of us cannot afford that luxury. You will find the guides are both willing and enthusiastic in their quest and you are certain to be faced with mores subjects than available film - two camera systems are not a luxury

here!

Each dive site boasts a particular species speciality, although they all have an amazing variety. Some are good for nudibranchs where you will find upwards of twenty five species in a single dive. Others are havens for frog fish, ghost pipe fish, cockatoo wasp fish, Inimicus scorpion fish, snake eels and numerous other relatively 'common' species. Certain areas of the shore line plunge straight into the water forming shallow walls which are overhung by trees and vegetation. Here you will find a riot of colour as invertebrates and sponges fight for space on the wall. Deeper water species like sea fans are also able to thrive here, due to the lower light levels, and you will discover a selection of gobies, cling fish and crustaceans who make their home on these corals. The walls bottom



The flamboyant cuttle fish looks dull until you pass your hand over it - then colours will ripple across its surface. Nikon F90X, 105mm, Subal, Inon quad flash, Velvia f16 @125th.

out on rubble reefs with outcrops of coral which are peppered with feather stars which, if not host ghost pipe fish, are home to tiny crinoid shrimps and squat lobsters. These take a great deal of patience to find and even more to photograph at high magnification. Much has been written about Lembeh and I have found that little of it has been

exaggerated - if you enjoy macro photography then you will be overwhelmed by the choice of subjects.

So Manado has many attractions for both the serious photographer and those who simply enjoy spectacular reef diving. If that is not enough then there are jungle trips, volcanoes, waterfalls, white

water rafting or simply island hopping to enjoy. This contrasting experience costs little more than a quality live aboard week in the Red Sea and promises a cornucopia of photographic subjects which are considered rare at other locations.

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