

North Sulawesi

by Marco Walter

My wife and I spent our more than three weeks lasting honeymoon-trip in one of the most diversified diving areas of the world: Manado Bay and Bangka Island. Both areas belong to the Bunaken National Park in the most northern part of Sulawesi, Indonesia. Starting point of the amazing trip was the Murex dive resort near by Manado, the capitol city of North Sulawesi. From there, daily trips to the bay of Manado and to the Bunaken N.P. are offered. Already in 1991 the underwater area around Bunaken, Manado Tua, Siladen, Montehage and Nain islands became a national marine protected area. Today, the park covers a total area of 79,056 hectares, 97% of which is ocean. There is an entrance fee that is used for the preservation of the park and for the villages on the islands.

The Manado Bay is a paradise for critter lovers were the appeal of the underwater landscape doesn't lie in colourful and well grown corals, but still impresses by its biological diversity. The sea floor is mostly covered by dark, grey lava sand which mostly prevents the growth of corals. However, there are quite a few knoll reefs which form important

retreat areas of rare species. One of the most popular dive sites there is Bethlehem-Poopoh, whose rare critters were discovered more than 20 years ago by one of the dive pioneers in that area and today's owner of the Murex dive resort, Dr. Han Batuna. The dive guides told us that the name Bethlehem stands for 'Better than Lembbeh' – we actually can't disagree. There, the sea floor is abundantly covered with sea grass where many species of nudibranches can be discovered: Polyceridae, Notodorididae, Gymnodorididae, Chromodorididae, Halgerididae and Phyllidiidae. Besides, many sea horses were found by the experienced dive guides, like the Estuary Seahorse (*Hippocampus kuda*) and Thorny Seahorses (*Hippocampus histrix*). Also well hidden Ghost Pipefishes, e.g. the Ornate Ghost Pipefish *Solenostomus paradoxus*, small frog fishes (Clown Anglerfish *Antennarius maculatus* and Painted Anglerfish *Antennarius pictus*), Leaf Scorpionfishes (*Taenianotus triacanthus*), and well hidden Snake Eels (*Ophichthus melanochir*) mark attractive motives for macrophotographers.

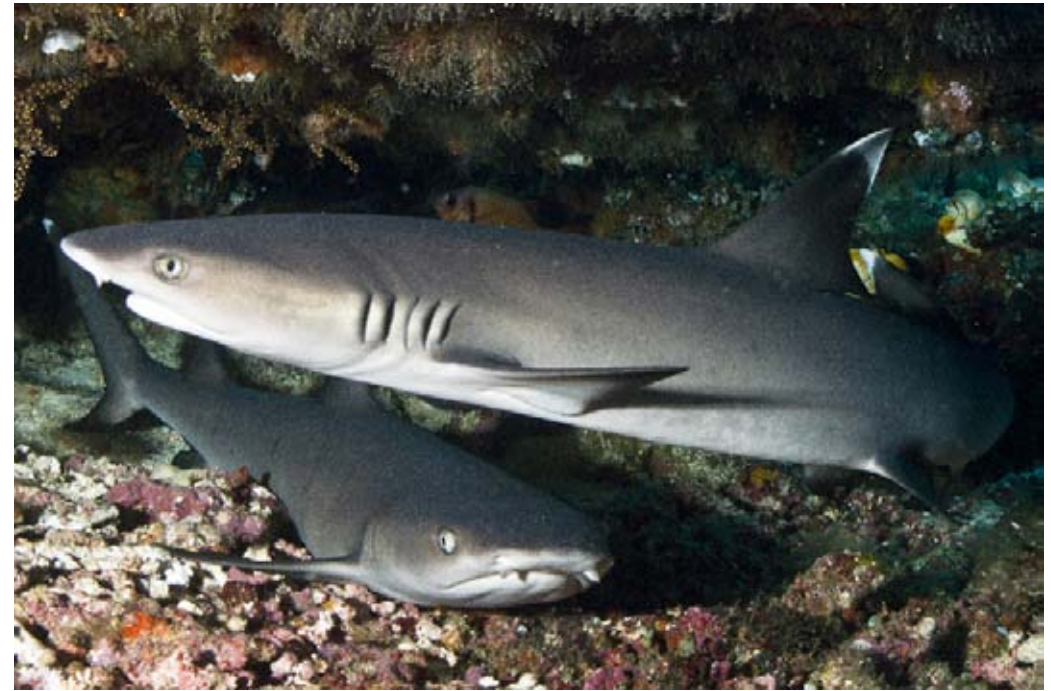


(Above) *Knotted Fan Coral Melithaea ochracea* at Mandolin, Bunaken Island – Sea & Sea DX-1G with 18 mm wide angle converter, Manual: 1/125th, f5.7, ISO 100, Sea & Sea YS-110_: Manual.

(Right) *Clown Anglerfish Antennarius maculatus* at Bethlehem-Poopoh, Manado Bay – Sea & Sea DX-1G: 24mm, Manual: 1/100th, f16, ISO 100, Sea & Sea YS-110_: Manual.

The centrepiece of the Bunaken National Marine Park, Bunaken Island, lies about 60 minutes by boat away from Manado. Compared to the Manado Bay, most of the dive sites around the Bunaken Island are characterized by very deep and steep walls, pocketed with small caves and overhangs. All places are nicely covered by hard and soft corals. The location and the structure of the island





(Above) *Mimic Octopus Thaumoctopus mimicus* at Paradise Pier, Bangka Island – Sea & Sea DX-1G with 18 mm wide angle converter, Manual: 1/125th, f5, ISO 100, Sea & Sea YS-110_: Manual.

(Top right) Juvenile White-Tip Sharks *Triaenodon obesus* at Sahaung, Bangka Island – Sea & Sea DX-1G with 18 mm wide angle converter, Manual: 1/125th, f6.3, ISO 100, Sea & Sea YS-110_: Manual.

(Right) Stone Fish *Synanceia* sp. at Paradise Pier, Bangka Island – Sea & Sea DX-1G with 18 mm wide angle converter, Manual: 1/125th, f12, ISO 100, Sea & Sea YS-110_: Manual.



cause quite strong currents which are responsible for the good chance to see pelagics like sharks, eagle rays, and swarms of mackerels and tunas as well as marine turtles. For us, the two most exciting dive sites at Bunaken Island are Mandolin and Ron's Point. The dive site Mandolin couldn't be more diversified. On the one hand, the dive guides discovered small Pygmy Seahorses (*Hippocampus bargibanti*)

well hidden in gorgonians of genus *Muricella*. On the other hand, it is worth looking into the blue from time to time as there are good chances to see huge swarms of juvenile Sawtooth Barracudas (*Sphyrna putnamiae*) and Blue-Striped Snappers (*Lutjanus kasmira*), and groups of Napoleon Wrasses (*Cheilinus undulates*). Compared to that, the dive site Ron's Point is located at the land

tongue of the Bunaken Island where strong currents almost guarantee the occurrence of sharks and huge fish swarms. We saw many White-Tip Sharks (*Triaenodon obesus*), Black-Tip Sharks (*Carcharhinus melanopterus*) and impressive Grey Reef Sharks (*Carcharhinus amblyrhynchos*). Swarms of Dogtooth Tuna (*Gymnosarda unicolor*) and Big-Eye Trevallies (*Caranx sexfasciatus*)

completed a perfect dive day.

From Manado Bay, one has the possibility to do some trips to the highlands of Minahasa and to the pulsating city of Manado to get to know the country and its people. We decided to make a one-day trip to the Mahawu volcano, around 1800



(Far left top) Caldera of Mount Mahawu, Minahasa Highlands with the active Lokon volcano in the background.

(Far left bottom) Sulphur lake near by the village Tomohon, Minahasa Highlands

(Left) Two green turtles Chelonia mydas were set free by Buddhist monks.

m a.s.l. From the summit, one has a gigantic panorama view to the city of Manado, the Manado Bay, the islands Bunaken and Siladen as well as to the surrounding mountain area. The fact that Indonesia is part of the geological 'ring of fire' can be experienced in real-life. Indonesia is arranged at the boundary of the Philippine and the Eurasian tectonic plate, where earthquakes and volcano eruptions occur frequently. During the time of our trip, the nearby volcano Lukon erupted dense clouds of smoke up to the sky. The volcanic evolutionary history of that area can also be experienced by the visit of

the sulphur lake near by the village Tomohon. The idyllically situated lake is of bright green colour and sulphuric gas bubbles emerge continuously. The way to the Minahasa highlands runs through several small villages. Near by Pineleng, we visited one of the traditional markets. Without going into the details, it is a fact that the poor local people offer to sell animals which we, as being guests, actually want to admire in their natural environment, regardless if under or above the water.

By chance, we became witnesses how a few Buddhist monks bought two green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) at

one of these markets. In the evening, the turtles were set free in a ritual with vocals and benediction.

After nearly two weeks of fantastic dives and adventures, we travelled to Bangka Island, approximately one hour by boat away from the north of Manado. By contrast to the Murex dive resort in Manado, the resort at Bangka Island is idyllically situated on a small bay, almost perfectly integrated in the nature with its green rain forest. The resort is designed for up to 16 guests who stay in small traditional cottages, directly at the white beach. There is no civilisation noise, no traffic,

and therefore, no stress – a perfect place for recreation. The remoteness of the island leads to the fact that the surrounding dive sites are not visited by the boats of any other dive resort – simply fantastic. One of the most impressive dive sites in that area is Paradise Pier. There, one can experience the volcanic activity of the entire region even underwater. The wooden pier of an abandoned hotel complex became densely overgrown by many species of soft corals and gorgonians. The highlight of this dive spot are several hot springs where water with temperatures of up to 50 °C comes out of the earth's interior. We discovered two Stone Fishes (*Synanceia* sp.) which were perfectly buried in the dark lava sand and, one the most exciting creatures I've ever seen: a Mimic Octopus (*Thaumoctopus mimicus*), actually discovered by my wife. The dives at Paradise Pier were brought to



Banggai Cardinalfishes Pterapogon kauderni at Teluk Kambahu, Lembah Street – Sea & Sea DX-1G with 18 mm wide angle converter, Manual: 1/125th, f8.9, ISO 100, Sea & Sea YS-110_: Manual.

perfection by huge swarms of Blue-Striped Snappers (*Lutjanus kasmira*). Another exciting dive site at Bangka Island is Sahaung. There, a huge rock formation, a few hundreds meters away from the coast, causes strong currents and guarantees impressive dives. We saw many Reef Sharks, groups of Big Sawtooth Barracudas (*Sphyrna putnamiae*), swarms of Blue-Striped Snappers (*Lutjanus kasmira*), Dark-Banded Fusiliers (*Pterocaesio tile*) and Mackerels (*Scomber scombrus*). Additionally,

juvenile White-Tip Sharks (*Triaenodon obesus*) staying below a huge solid table coral at daytime were perfect motives for photographers.

From Bangka Island, daytrips are offered to one of the most spectacular dive areas of the world: Lembah Street. What we expected were dive sites totally covered by trash caused by the industrial use of that sea gate, especially near by the harbour which is permanently used by huge container ships. The life below the water surface seems to be arranged with that specific



Swarm of glassfish Parapriacanthus sp. at Nudi Retreat, Lembah Street – Sea & Sea DX-1G with 18 mm wide angle converter, Manual: 1/125th, f4.1, ISO 100, Sea & Sea YS-110_: Manual.

situation as there are many critters and exciting creatures more or less hidden in the grey lava sand. Beside numerous species of nudibranchs (Polyceridae, Notodorididae, Gymnodorididae, Chromodorididae and Phyllidiidae), we discovered bizarre Scorpion Fishes, rare Flathead Fishes (*Papilloculiceps longiceps*) and octopuses. To our surprise, we even discovered many Banggai Cardinalfishes (*Pterapogon kauderni*) at the dive site Teluk Kambahu. As this specie is in fact endemic in a

small area around the Banggai Islands of Sulawesi, we were quite surprised to see them in the Lembah Street. One of the dive guides told us later, that a fishing boat has been captured years ago by customs officials. The crew set the Banggai Cardinalfishes free which were originally caught for aquaristic purposes. The dive site Nudi Retreat is not as wasted as most of the other spots in the Lembah Street. We found small walls densely covered by colourful soft corals and gorgonians. There, the guides



Blue-Striped Snappers *Lutjanus kasmira* at Ron's Point, Bunaken Island – Sea & Sea DX-1G with 18 mm wide angle converter, Manual: 1/125th, f7.2, ISO 100, Sea & Sea YS-110_: Manual.



Three *Halgerda males* nudibranchs at Bethlehem-Poopoh, Manado Bay – Sea & Sea DX-1G: 24mm, Manual: 1/160th, f4.2, ISO 100, Sea & Sea YS-110_: Manual.

discovered a few Pygmy Seahorses, many species of nudibranchs, swarms of glassfish (*Parapriacanthus* sp.), Leaf Scorpionfishes (*Taenianotus triacanthus*) and a rare Electric Shell (*Lima scabra*) which imitates electricity by small blue and red lightnings between their mantles in order to avoid predators.

The dive spots in North Sulawesi belong to the most impressive ones in the whole world. One finds everything you dream of, from muck dives with rare critters to steep walls with many

pelagics. But this biologic diversity marks a challenge for each underwater photographer, not concerning the motives, but relative to the equipment. Which lens should a photographer choose when the dive guide tells you that you have good chances to discover small Pygmy Seahorses as well as swarms of tunas and pelagic sharks during the same dive? If one chooses the macro lens, you will definitely see fish swarms, or you choose the fisheye lens and you will for sure discover pygmy seahorses. To avoid that anger, I decided to use my flexible compact camera system for the most of the dives: Sea & Sea DX-1G camera with an 18 mm wide

angle converter and a Sea & Sea YS-110_ strobe. For the surface shots, I additionally used my F-90x Nikon-SLR and several lenses.

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