

Diving Bunaken Marine Park

with Erik Oskarsson

North Sulawesi is without doubt a popular dive destination with several thousand of international visitors annually, attracted by the well known and established muck diving capital of the world, the Strait of Lembeh, and the wonderful critters lurking around in the black sand. However, the sibling, or perhaps cousin, of the notorious critter strait is without hesitation the Bunaken National Marine Park, located in the North west of the City of Manado. Scarcely populated by divers from dive centres situated on the Island of Bunaken, and the areas of Manado, it is essentially a wall divers dream location, thus quite the opposite of Lembeh Strait. At least so if one only focus upon the topography of the two locations, however if one dig a little deeper it is quite possible to see the similarities between these two very different dive locations.

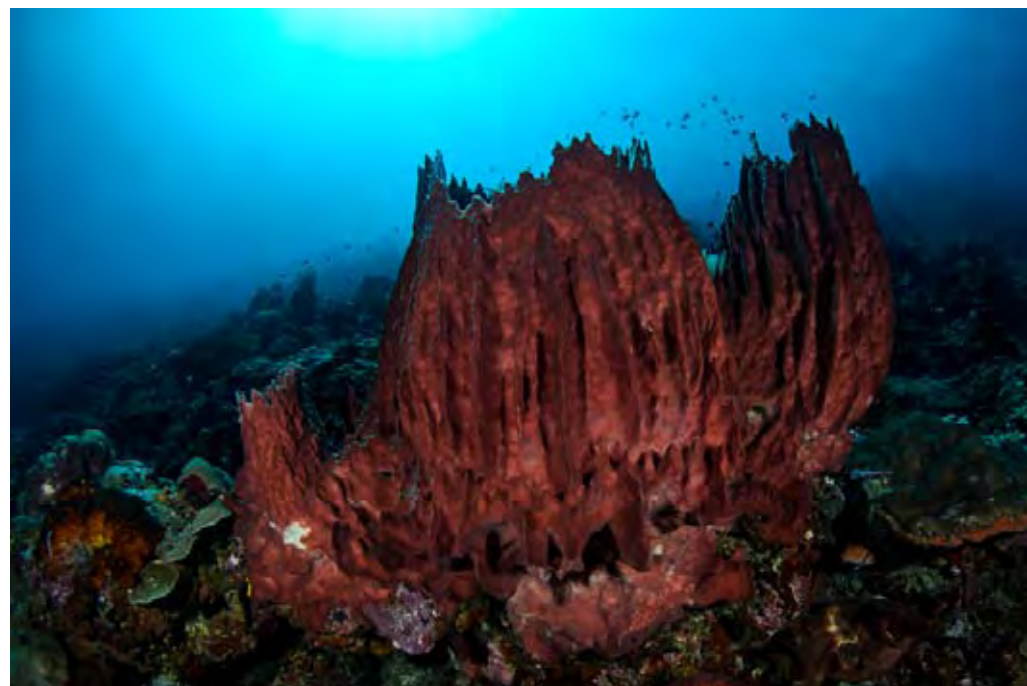
The Bunaken national marine park is a fairly large establishment, covering an area of 860 square km, where only 3% is terrestrial, comprising of the Bunaken Island and the few surrounding islands, Manado Doa, Mantehage, Nain and

Siladen. The waters around Bunaken National Marine Park are up to 1500 meters deep, with a temperature range between 27 – 29 C° all year around, though the high season for scuba diving is between May and August. The attributes of the surrounding sea creates a unique environment for marine life to prosper, with a very high coral reef life diversity including fish, corals and echinoderms. The marine park also claims to have more than 70% of the all the known fish species of the western indo Pacific.

One potential factor of explanation to the marine life in

(Top) A beautiful Bunaken sunset with Manado Doa as a background. Nikon D300, Nikon 12 – 24 mm 1/400 f9,0 ISO: 200

(Right) One of many large sponges found at the walls around the Bunaken National Marine Park Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, 2 Inon Z-240 Strobes, ULCS Arms and clams, Light&Motion Sola 600 focus light. Tokina 10 – 17 mm Fish eye 1/160 f10,0 ISO: 200



Bunaken National Marine Park is the strong currents, I have been told. The northeast currents sweep through the marine park, and are faced with counter current on the south side of Bunaken Island, and thus creating strong circular currents, forcing nutritious water to constantly flow around the island. These currents are believed to create the unique environment for corals and marine life to grow around Bunaken.

A typical dive day in for a resident on Bunaken island starts with 2 morning dives and one afternoon dive. During forenoon 2 dives are planned at some of the 30ish dive sites, and the surface interval is spent on the boat, with mandatory hydration and sunbathing activities. And once the second dive is finished the boat returns to the resort for lunch. In the afternoon another dive is planned, as a regular wall dive or muck dive, or a little bit later during the afternoon, as a mandarin dive. For the die-hard diver even a night dive can be included in the daily schedule. The day is completely stress free, as the guides and deckhands help the diver with more or less anything.

The dive boats used are the traditional North Sulawesi boat, build out of wood, with a fairly flat bottom, which makes it a little bit rocky if the wind picks up. But they are functional in terms of diving. Easy to get into the



Large table corals are a very common sight Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, 2 Inon Z-240 Strobes, Tokina 10 – 17 mm Fish eye 1/160 f10 ISO: 200

water, and with normal effort to get back onto the boat again once the dive is finished.

I usually avoid stating favourite dive sites, as divers perception of dives sites varies, though I do believe some of the sites around Bunaken require some extra attention. Perhaps I could argue them to be the exception of the rule. Anyway my favourite



A diver riding the strong Bunaken current. Nikon D7000, Nauticam, 2 Inon Z-240 Strobes, Tokina 10 – 17 mm Fish eye 1/200 f10 ISO:200

dive sites in the area are Fukui, Ron's point and Muka. Fukui differs from the "traditional" Bunaken dive site, as it is not a wall, but rather a sloping bottom with an impressive stag horn coral garden, as far as the visibility allows one to see. This is also an excellent place to identify some of the close to 30 species of butterfly fish that is documented



Large school of Chevron Barracudas. Nikon D7000, Nauticam Housing, 2 Inon Z-240 Strobes, Tokina 10 – 17 mm Fish eye 1/80 f6,3 ISO: 200

in Bunaken National Marine Park. Fukui main attraction is nevertheless the impressively large giant clams found on a small shelf to the east along the slope. In the waters of Bunaken dives can see 7 of the 8 species of giant clams documented in the world. The next dive site, Ron's point is a slightly different dive site in comparison to Fukui, as it is known

for strong currents and pelagic action, as tunas, jacks and trevallies hunt in the current at the point of the reef. As a diver most of the time is spent just watching out in the blue for big stuff, or if the current is right just watching all the stuff stirred up by the pelagic activity. Visibility can vary a lot with the current, and some times a lot of current results in less visibility. Muka is without doubt my favourite dive site on the eastern side of Bunaken, as it offers excellent corals, strong currents (which offers some challenge for a photographer) and very high chances of encountering both hawksbill turtles and green turtles. Muka is especially beautiful on the shallows, with large quantities of fish and usually impressive visibility. It is not unusual that the current pushes the divers along almost the whole east side of Bunaken, hence Muka is several dive sites crammed into one.

The name Barracuda point feels like a rather established term in the diving world, and there are most likely a bunch of dive sites around the world carrying that name, some more official than others. Presumably the most famous one is to be found at Sipidan, in Malaysia, which is well documented in both pictures and text. The somewhat less famous “Barracuda Point” in the Bunaken National Marine Park, offers equally excellent wall diving opportunities,

with rich walls covered by sponges and corals, and the chance of spotting large schools of chevron barracudas, as well as jacks and tunas.

In my experience diving at Bunaken’s Barracuda point requires a bit of planning and some experience for the highest possible chance of seeing large schools of Barracudas. The trick is to monitor the tidal current, as the current goes out so does the schools of fish, and once the current is going back in the schools are soon to follow. Thus, a dive at Barracuda point needs to be planned accordingly.

Ideally a trip to the north parts of the Marine Park, and Barracuda point, should be organised as a full day trip, so that the dives can be flexible with the tidal current in mind. Unlike the most of the walls at Bunaken Island, the barracuda point wall is sloping giving the dive a different character all together. Heading north towards the northern tip of the reef divers normally face the current. Even though it can be a little exhausting swimming against the current in the beginning of the dive it increases the chances of seeing the big stuff.

In similarity with Lembeh straits, visiting Bunaken would not be a complete experience without doing a night diving enjoying some of the night active critters living on the walls and slopes. As far as I have



Probably one of the most common fish in North Sulawesi. Nikon D7000, Nauticam, 2 Inon Z-240 Strobes, Sigma 105 mm EX Macro 1/400 f14.0 ISO: 200

understood more or less any random rare critter can show up during night dives in Bunaken. And even if you don’t see anything extraordinary some of the “normal” stuff is pretty weird to, such as Bobtail squid or an anemone hermit crab trying to be cocky fighting the light from dive torches. I am especially fond of the Bobtail squid, as it has this very shyish cute behaviour and yet a strikingly beautiful costume.

The macro diving around

Bunaken is not confined to night dives, as some of the dive sites closer to Manado, such as Mori and Xx, offers good opportunities to spotting interesting critters and nudiebranchs. The diving here is very similar to Lembeh Straits, though there is no black sand but a soft brown muddy bottom, which can create rather intense irritation for a less careful underwater photographer. The diving on these sites is shallow and very uncomplicated, with no strong

*Nikon D7000,
Nauticam, 2 Inon
Z-240 Strobes,
ULCS Arms and
clams, Tokina 10
– 17 mm Fish eye
1/160 f10 ISO:
200*



currents pushing you back and forth, which adds positively to the macro experience.

The impressive depths in the Bunaken National Marine park is a compelling invitation to gear up in technical dive gear and see some of the deeper parts of the walls. The dive sites Lekuan I, II and III are beautiful dive sites below 40 meters, with good opportunities of seeing black tip and white tip reef sharks. Apparently even diving below 60 meters also offers interesting opportunities and excitement, especially since the prehistoric fish Coelacanth is rumoured to inhabit the Marine Park at depths of 100 meters, or more. Though, very few seem to have seen any of these mysterious fish, which perhaps correlates with the fact that very few divers visiting Bunaken

actually do technical diving. Without doubt, there is large potential in offering technical diving in Bunaken National Park.

Erik Oskarsson



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