

Bali's Offshore Islands

by Jeff Mullins

Lying just east of Bali, bang in the middle of the Lombok Strait, are a group of three islands that have long been regarded as difficult for divers to access. Fierce and unpredictable ocean currents combined with long swells from the Indian Ocean south of Bali, made boat journeys to the islands, an adventurous if not risky affair.

The three islands, Nusa Lembongan, Nusa Ceningan and Nusa Penida lie 20kms east of Sanur on Bali. Their main attractions include stunning white sand beaches, world class surfing, pristine coral reefs and quiet village atmosphere. Many of the islands residents are seaweed farmers. The clear inshore waters of Nusa Penida and Lembongan provide ideal conditions for growing high quality seaweeds that are exported for use in the manufacture of food preservatives, and cosmetics. These same clear waters also host some of Indonesia's richest coral reefs, along with stunning marine life.

I recently visited the islands for the first time in well over ten years. Back then the only transport to the islands was on traditional jukung's, canoes with twin bamboo outrigger's. To make matters worse, overnight accommodation at the island's was at the very best, extremely basic and not intended for tourists. Well I didn't stay overnight and the resulting late afternoon boat trip back was in horrendous sea conditions. You don't need to guess why I hadn't



Lembongan Farms

Seaweed farms lie between Nusa Lembongan & Nusa Ceningan, villagers work the farms on low tide each day.

Lembongan Reef Scene

Basslets explode from a soft coral coated bommie in Toyapakeh Bay. Nikonos 15mm, Seatite II with Aqua Sea 100 slave, Provia, f8 @1/60th.



returned for so long!

For this trip we boarded Bali Hai Cruises 30 metre luxury high speed catamaran, Bali Hai II at Benoa Port on Bali. The hour or so trip to Nusa

Lembongan was in total armchair comfort, sipping coffee and watching an underwater video compiled at the islands. We also met the dive crew from Bali Hai Diving Adventures,



Hai Tide Hut. Hai Tide Huts on Nusa Lembongan are Robinson Crusoe style, in Air Conditioned comfort.



Gorgonia & Sunburst. Big bommies in Crystal Bay have Gorgonias growing on them in only 8 metres deep. Nikonos 15mm, Aqua Sea 140&100 slave, Provia, f11 @1/60th.

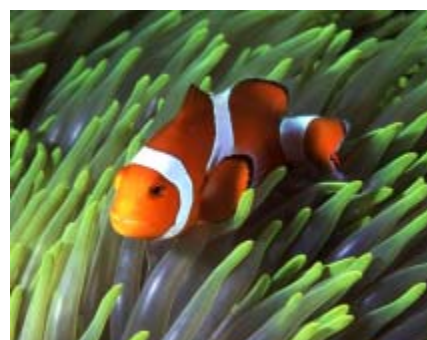
who organise dives at the islands to match each divers experience level.

Bali Hai Diving Adventures run an 8 metre alloy dive boat Serendipity to reach the dive sites spread around the islands. The dive boat meets Bali Hai II then travels directly to the first dive site and returns for lunch. Afternoon dives are timed to meet the return ferry or to your overnight accommodation on Lembongan.

Diving sites around the islands are quite varied, but a couple of attributes are common to all sites; Currents on most sites are moderate and sometimes strong, so drift dives are the normal procedure. Cool

water 'up-welling' from the Lombok Strait keeps water temperatures a few degrees cooler than on mainland Bali (22-28 degrees Celcius) Underwater visibility is also consistently better (from 15-40 metres). The up-welling, nutrient rich cold water from deep down in the Lombok Strait, also brings pelagic visitors to relatively shallow waters. Oceanic Sunfish (Mola Mola), Manta Rays, sharks and other pelagic fish are commonly sighted around the islands. But the reefs also boast terrific hard and soft corals, sponges and reef fish.

The main dive sites are located off Nusa Penida with a couple off Nusa Lembongan and



Clownfish

A clownfish inhabits an unusual green anemone in the shallows at the dive site S.D. Canon AE1P, Sigma 90mm macro, Tussey T300 extended flat port, Aqua Sea 140&100 slave, Velvia, f19 @1/60th

Diver in Cave

Toyapakeh Bay has small cavelets and ledges lined with soft corals & gorgonias. Nikonos 15mm, Seatite II with Aqua Sea 100 slave, Provia, f5.6 @1/60th.

Molamola

This huge Molamola approached whilst I was looking under a ledge, my son took this photo just before it swam off. Nikonos 1VA and Sea& Sea 15mm, Natural Light, Provia, f4 on Auto. Photo by Michael Mullins.



Nusa Ceningan. Toyapakeh – is a bay on the north-west corner of Nusa Penida. It has large coral outcrops along the edge of a steep rock drop-off in around 8-15 metres deep. The outcrops are covered with many varieties of hard corals, plus orange and pink soft corals. Clouds of basslets and anthias surround the outcrops along with coral cod, butterfly fish, sea snakes and schools of sweetlips.

Cavelets and ledges on the outcrops harbour angelfish, hawkfish, moray eels and scorpionfish. Deeper down on a steep rocky slope, are larger pelagic visitors, including schools of jacks and regular sightings of sunfish (Molamola). Toyapakeh is one of the premier dive-sites around these islands and it is hard to describe the colour and sheer variety of marine life found here.

Pura Ped – Is a reef offshore from a village temple. This stunning site has almost 100% hard coral coverage with raised coral bommies in depths from 6-18 metres deep along a steady slope. From 18 metres the slope gets steeper and is almost vertical from 50 metres.

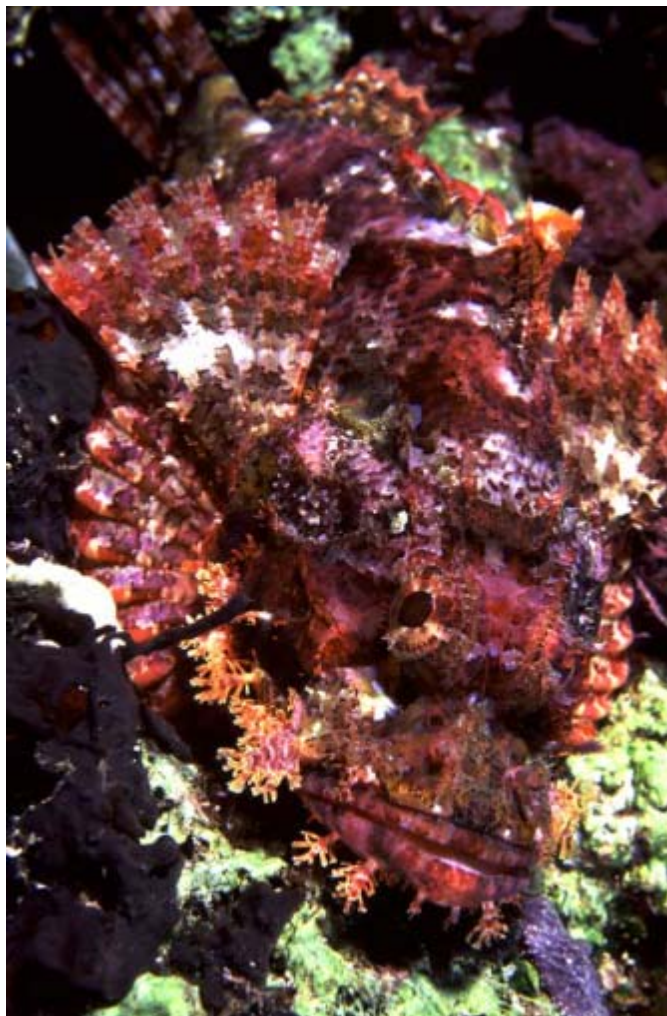


The reef is a kilometre-long stretch of coral bommies. Gorgonia fans sprout from some outcrops and sponges grow at odd angles due to the strong currents here. Schools of unicorn fish and surgeonfish swirl around in mid water, plus hoardes of fish surround the reef, white tip reef sharks are regularly seen cruising the reef or resting below ledges.

S.D. – (short for Sekola Desar, Indonesian for Elementary School). This reef is just offshore from a school, and

is a continuation of Pura Ped (above) but has more soft coral growth on the bommies, plus lots of big angelfish, basslets and colourful anthias surround every outcrop of coral.

The deeper parts of this reef are good places to look out for sunfish being cleaned near the reef, I saw a pair drifting together on the edge at 50 metres. Sharks often cruise past including a large hammerhead that is occasionally sighted. The currents are often not as strong



Scorpionfish

Bearded Scorpionfish lie around the reef at the reef offshore from Pura Ped. Canon AE1P, Canon 50mm macro, Tussey T300 flat port, Aqua Sea 140&100 slave, Velvia, f16 @1/60th.

as at Pura Ped.

Gamat Bay - is a small bay on the west coast of Nusa Penida in the channel facing Nusa Ceningan, with minimal currents. The shallows are particularly rich with big coral bommies and coral patch reefs over a sand bottom at between 4 and 10 metres deep. Crimson red gorgonia fans sprout here and there from the reef, while orange and yellow soft corals hang from ledges and coral outcrops. Around the bottom are lots of anemones complete with anemone fish and porcelain crabs.

Moray eels and camouflaged scorpionfish hide among the abundant sponges and corals. Many coral cod and large angelfish fin around the reefs, and turtles often feed in the bay. Deeper at around 15-20 metres are some big rock outcrops on a steeply sloping rock bottom. On one dive here a big estuary cod watched us cautiously from a small cave, inside were schools of soldier fish and sponges covered the ceiling, we also saw a large maori wrasse cruising among these outcrops.

In the north corner of the bay at 30 metres we drifted along a wide overhanging ledge where the bottom dropped almost vertically down into the

depths of the Ceningan Channel. This became a steady slope with small ledges in the shallows, here we found several mantis shrimp, scorpionfish, nudibranchs and other smaller oddities.

Blue Corner - is outside the surf break on the north coast of Nusa Lembongan. The terrain is mostly rocky bottom with a series of low ledges that progressively descend down to 30 metres, where a steeper rock wall continues down into the abyss. Blue Corner has very strong currents and often the visibility is blurred at some depths by the mixing of warm surface waters and upwelling cold waters.

The area is renown for big fish sightings; Nurse sharks, white tips, schooling tuna and trevally, plus a high incidence of sunfish sightings. Coral is mostly in shallower depths at the southern end of the reef, where some huge porites bommies and stronger hard corals flourish. Parrotfish, turtles, unicornfish and smaller tropical fish frequent this area.

Manta Point - is on the south coast of Nusa Penida, facing the Indian Ocean and its never-ending line of swells. The only attraction here are groups of manta rays that regularly congregate around an exposed rock outcrop. Corals are almost non-existent; mostly barren limestone reef drops off into deep water from the rock. But the manta rays are reason enough for divers to be attracted here, often groups of a dozen or more feed around the rock. Surface conditions aren't always suitable for diving, as large swells roll in here, but a good day with plenty of mantas is a hard one to beat.

Crystal Bay - is on Nusa Penida, at the southern end of Toyapakeh Strait. The bay cuts deeply back into the cliffs with a large exposed rock at the entrance, and a sandy beach at the head of the bay. The southern face of this rock has big coral bommies in only 8 metres of water along the edge of a sandy slope. This gradually becomes a



Leaf Scorpion

This leaf scorpionfish was found just below the dive boat in Toyapakeh Bay. Canon AE1P, Canon 50mm macro, Tussey T300 flat port, Aqua Sea 140&100 slave, Velvia, f16 @1/60th.

steep wall covered in staghorn corals, towards the western tip of the rock. Huge plate corals coloured in green or blue line the shallows, while yellow and orange soft corals hang from coral bommies along the edge of the wall.

Fish life is quite diverse from tiny gobies and anemone fish, through to Tuna and a resident school of batfish. Hordes of butterflyfish, flutemouth's, sweetlip and angelfish shelter around the bommies. Another site at the northern corner of the bay has a cave that can be entered underwater, leading into the cliff. Divers surface inside above water, where the cave is occupied by thousands of fruit bats. More coral outcrops are spread around the bottom outside of the cave entrance plus a drop-off where strong currents offer a good possibility of seeing sunfish, sharks and larger pelagics.

Back on Nusa Lembongan Bali Hai Cruises have recently built a small group of 'huts'. Hai Tide Huts are located right on the beach, just above the high tide mark, all with views to the sea. The air-conditioned double

rooms are elevated on timber poles, accessed via a ladder. Below each room is a shaded open-air resting area, plus upstairs is a small verandah complete with a table and two chairs.

These are a great place to spend a few days relaxing, diving and just taking in the peaceful beach scenery of Lembongan. Excellent snorkelling sites are just off the beach adjacent to the huts or in nearby bays. In the evening the sun sets over the cliffs at the end of the bay and all is quiet, except the lapping of waves on the beach. Excellent meals are available on the timber deck overhanging the beach, and include Indonesian and Western foods at very reasonable prices.

Other activities on the islands include tours of Lembongan Village, paddling a wave ski around the bay, snorkelling or glass bottom boat trips around the offshore reefs. These activities are all organised daily from the Bali Hai Beach Club, adjacent to Hai Tide Huts. Surfing the superb reef breaks, walks around the island to meet the very quiet villagers or to view seaweed farms can be

arranged by locals. Early morning or late afternoon walks on the long white beaches on Lembongan will leave lasting impressions.

For more information contact Michael at Bali Hai Diving Adventures by e-mail at diverse@indosat.net.id or visit the Bali Hai Cruises website at www.balihaicruises.com/

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