

BURMA

Myanmar Andaman Resort, 2007, Paul Tischler, Bethesda, MD. Experience: 200+ dives. Vis: 20 to 70 feet. Water: 80 F, calm and flat. A good experience if already in area. Otherwise, too hard to get to. Three dives a day. Had to carry own equipment to small boat both ways in shallow water. Dive site 10-20 minutes, usually 3-6 divers for the one boat. Resort is good.

INDONESIA

Indonesia is the hottest dive destination on the planet, thanks to superlative diving. Good airfares and inexpensive food and hotels make it reachable for many Americans who can afford at least two weeks' time. Bali's culture is fantastic (especially go inland) and the diving is good (but even better elsewhere) and inexpensive. Bali-based live-aboards regularly visit the excellent diving near and around Komodo Island and stage land visits with the famed Komodo dragons. The Lembah Straits are renowned for muck diving. Perhaps no more diverse marine life exists anywhere than that around the Raja Ampat islands, offshore Irian Jaya, which shares the same landmass as Papua New Guinea. Check with the State Department before travel, but nearly all diving is far from terrorist targets.

Bali

ENA Dive Centre, March 2007, Robert MacDonald, Kamloops, BC. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 70 Feet. Water: 82 to 85 F, choppy. Our visit

was scheduled by a non-diver travel agent — the only mistake. The diving was phenomenal: corals and critters were abundant. Had we known more about Menjangan Island, we would have arranged a stay of a few days to take in Secret Bay and other dive sites. ENA Dive was professional and helpful finding critters to photograph. Their dive masters were friendly and courteous — a real pleasure to dive with. We toured the island, staying at a number of locations. ENA's resort in Lovina was nice, but the nicest was Mimpis in Tulamben.

Udayana Eco Lodge, March 2007, Serena Black, Bonaire, Netherlands Antilles. Experience: Over 1000 dives. I spent March diving in North and South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The trip required overnighiting in Bali on 3 separate occasions. Udayana Lodge was so delightful I stayed there the next 2 times. The lodge is in the Jimbarang Heights above Denpasar, about a 20-minute drive from the airport. The rooms are immaculate and air-conditioned. The swimming pool is in the middle of a garden. Meals are served on a fan-cooled verandah with a view of the bay and Mt Agung. Many of the staff speak English. This was a tranquil place to recover from the 40-hour trip to get to Bali.

Maumere

Ankermi/Happy Dive, August 2007, Michael Bode (michael@bodeweb.de), Braunschweig, Germany. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 10 to 20 Meters. Water: 27 to 28 C, calm, currents. Ankermi/Happy Dive is a small resort 29 km east of Maumere, whose top critter dive site, Wodong Beach, is just in front. Here you find frog fish, flying gurnards, Pegasus, different kinds of

lionfish (including the blue fin one), mimic octopus, ghost pipefish, Mandarinfish, etc. There is also a Japanese wreck just in front, with more critters but not good viz. Coral and big fish are further out. You go there on local boats, which is nothing for spoiled divers. However, there are beautiful walls and reefs around the islands in front, with occasional shark encounters. Currents can be strong here. The new resort consists of five simple two-story bungalows with a double bed downstairs and another bed upstairs. There are open-air mandi-style bathrooms. Staying here is cheap: Half pension is only 15 US\$; shore diving is 20 Euro per dive (if you bring your own equipment). Charging batteries was a problem. There is only electricity from 6 p.m. until 6 a.m. Night dives had to take place late after having recharged the empty batteries from the day dives. The new resort has a new and clean dive shop with space for cleaning uw equipment. Bungalows are small, without a/c. The only place to clean and arrange your equipment is on the small veranda of your bungalow or in the dive shop.

Pantar Island

Alor Divers, September 2006, Michael Bode (michael@bodeweb.de), Braunschweig, Germany. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 30 Meters. Water: 20 to 28 C, calm, currents. Alor Divers is a new dive resort situated on Pantar Island which was just opening when we arrived there. You can stay comfortably in one of the six new and spacious bungalows on the beach. All bungalows have hot and cold showers, western-style toilets and big verandas. The dive shop is well organized and professionally maintained. A big restaurant with lounge and small library

invites guests to relax in the shade. Very good French-Slovenian-Indonesian-Cuisine. The 140 HP-powered dive boat reaches all dive sites in Pantar Strait in 5 to 30 minutes. All other land-based dive operations in Alor have to pass the 15 km long Kalabahi Bay before they reach the dive spots. Alor Divers are much closer to the main dive spots and the accommodation is better than in town where we usually had to stay when we dived Alor. The house reef is a steep slope with wall sections in between. Good coverage of soft and hard coral, eagle rays and critters. In August there may be surge caused by the east wind. Very good visibility, great macro opportunities but not as much big fish we had seen during our 4 previous visits.

Raja Ampat Islands

Kri Island Eco Resort, March/April 2007, Rosemary Gutwillig (rustyat-bay@aol.com), Greenport, NY.

Experience: 350 dives. Vis: 20 to 85 feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, calm and flat, choppy, surge, strong currents. The Raja Ampat Islands have to have the most beautiful diving in the world. From JFK it took 4 airplanes, a boat, and logged 58 hours. And at this "eco" resort you are not pampered with everyday amenities. The accommodations are traditional Papuan palm bungalows set on stilts over the water and divided into 2 units with a common hall in between. Each unit has a single overhead lamp — if you want to read, bring a headlamp. There are outlets for charging purposes. There is a standing floor fan. Beds are covered with mosquito netting (the CDC mandates malaria prophylaxis for all Irian Jaya). There is no AC, and no running water in the bungalows. Instead, there are traditional Indonesian bathroom huts along the beach. These

feature a western toilet and a mandi — a tiled rectangular tank (3'X3'X3') filled with unheated, slightly saline water and furnished with a ladle. To flush, pour a ladleful into the bowl. To shower/shampoo, pour ladlefuls over your head. The meals are delicious preparations of Indonesian cuisine. The resort is administered by Maya, a charming and accommodating manager. Dive sites are mainly 10-20 minutes away and are reached by undecked, uncovered boats carrying around 6 divers. Entry is by backroll. All dives are drift dives led by Papuan guides. These men are excellent at spotting creatures large and minute, but with the exception of their chief, Nikson, they speak virtually no English. The density and diversity of the fish and coral life are breathtaking. Massed barracuda, trevally, mackerel hover feeding in the swift currents off Cape Cri while whitetips patrol 15 feet away and a tight revolving ball of sweetlips hangs below. Sun streams down on dozens of lazily circling bannerfish. Daily encounters with the weird tasseled wobbegong shark. Nudibranchs too numerous and varied to identify. Parades of tremendous bumphead parrots with serious incisors. Dense curtains of sweepers, anthias, chromis, surgeons, snappers, triggers (red-toothed). Angels and butterflies you've never seen before. Swimming eye to eye with enormous curious batfish. Close observation of mantas at their cleaning station. Floating up to sleeping turtles. Having a 10-foot banded sea snake slither between your fins (captured on video!). Dancing flatworms. Floating lions. Pygmy seahorses — if you need reading glasses, take a loupe. Giant morays and clams. Blue spotted rays. Pipefish. Cuttlefish. Crocodilefish. Mantis shrimp. Lobsters. Coral gardens of infinite variety and color expanding

endlessly. The thrill of a current-driven ride up the wall and over the reef top into the sunlight accompanying a school of bluestreak fusiliers. I'm going back.

Kri Eco Resort, March 2007, Sandra Cohen (offtoseethewiz@hotmail.com), Seattle, WA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 20 to 80 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F,

calm, currents. Our two-week stay at was superb; the resort is blessed with fabulous human and natural resources. Maya Hadorn is a Swiss woman who is managing Kri for Max (who spends all his time at the upscale Sorido Bay now). She is a treasure. The dive guides, boat crews, housekeeping staff, and kitchen staff are all kind and fun-loving Papuans who made us feel welcome. The dive guides and boat crew spoke little or no English, but that didn't matter, as they were incredibly helpful, careful divers. The two of us most often had one guide, Berjones, to ourselves. He has the most amazing eyes for small critters — flatworms and nudibranchs smaller than the white tip of my little fingernail. The day we arrived, Maya had us fill out forms stating what we hoped to see underwater, and the guides personalized their services to deliver. We were treated to pygmy seahorses, nudibranchs, and mantas, all as requested, and much more. The diving is some of the best in the world. Only thing missing is lots of large pelagics. Variety of life and quantity of coral and creatures are unmatched. We each dove about 30 times in 12 days of diving. Maya kept track of what sites we dove, remembered our preferences, made suggestions, and assigned divers to the small open boats. We had 16-18 guests at the resort the first week (capacity is 20), and only 7 the second. No dive guide ever had more than 4 divers, and most of the time it was 2 or 3. Maya

was clearly trying to make the visit as great as possible for each of us. Class operation, despite the many serious challenges of remoteness and simplicity of resources. We liked the food at Kri, in large part because it was mostly Indonesian, with lots of good, spicy sauces available. Veggies were delicious for as long as each Sunday's new supply lasted (they are not refrigerated), and fresh fruit was served with a smile after lunch and dinner. Each guest room at Kri has overhead electric lighting, but not sufficient for reading. Kri supplies full bedding, including nice mosquito nets, sheets and pillows. The room is made up daily, and sheets are changed twice a week. They also provide towels, changed every 2 days, and a bar of soap. There is a mirror in each guest room, and also in some of the mandi rooms. There are several mandi huts, with western toilets (flushed with water you pour in) and nice, clean tile floors. Mosquitoes tended to lurk in the mandis, particularly the buildings made entirely of thatch. Ample drinking water is available free in plastic pitchers that you can refill any time in the kitchen. Some cold pitchers of water are kept in the single fridge, along with canned beer. Bottled Aqua cost 0.5 Euro if you need it. We walked around Sorido Bay Resort, and were glad we didn't stay there (though the humidity and heat made the a/c tempting). It has no breeze because of the location in a bay, and has no view of the spectacular sunsets we enjoyed nightly from the jetty at Kri. The cabins are not out near the water, and the guests there seemed to be more likely to stay inside or on the porches of their own cabins, rather than mixing together happily as we all did at Kri. Most of Kri's guests are Europeans, though several other Americans were there. Some of the guests at Kri found

everything too primitive; they wanted guides and boatmen who spoke English or Dutch, and detailed site briefings before each dive. They were unhappy with the diet of mainly rice and chicken. And they thought the boats should run more reliably, especially in light of the price paid (particularly for the surcharge trips). The "fuel surcharge required for the more distant dive sites is too steep. Also, we found it difficult to sleep well because of the heat and humidity and the non-breathable foam mattresses. The portable fans in every room didn't help much, because they barely penetrated the mosquito nets. I got a couple of mosquito bites each evening despite long sleeves and pants treated with permethrin, and using DEET on all exposed skin. There must have been a bad batch of fuel, because almost all the boats experienced motor problems. This went on for a couple of days, and dives were late or divers had to wait for a replacement boat to pick them up after a dive. Boat crews didn't seem to get started trying to solve the problems until it was almost time for the dive. Brackish bathing water was quite salty. We were always sticky and salty and our skin began to rebel after about 10 days, with rashes and itches everywhere. Take anti-fungal powder along! All extra charges must be paid in cash upon departure (extra dives, fuel surcharge for distant dives, charges for beer and canned soft drinks and bottled water, T-shirts, etc.) They take many currencies (at rather poor rates), but only cash. The only other option is making a detour to the office in Sorong to pay with a credit card, for which Papua Diving adds a 3% premium. No travelers checks. UW Photography Comments: There were no fresh water rinse tanks on any of the boats for cameras, but that didn't bother us, as

we don't take underwater photos. The cameras of the others on our boat were carefully tended by the crew, who laid them down on towels and covered them with other clean towels during the trips to and from the resort.

Sorido Bay Resort, April 2007, Judy Foester, West Milford, NJ. Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 30 to 50 Feet. Water: 79 to 84 F, calm, currents. The heat and humidity were overwhelming and I think taking Malarone made it worse. One young Brit runs the entire dive operation and manages the resort (in charge of rats chewing wires, roofs leaking, large roaches running across faces at night, a smelly bathroom). The guests were from S. Africa, Britain, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Spain and 3 photo-journalists for GEO magazine. Max Ammer, owner, and his stories are priceless. Max would be a big hit on Jay Leno. We saw lots of wobbegong sharks, epaulette sharks, Mandarinfish, lionfish, scorpionfish, nudis, flatworms, opisthobranchs. This is a land that time forgot ... except for the turtles ... time and man seem to have wiped them out. There are air and ship wrecks, freshwater non-stinging jellyfish lakes, mangroves and passages with unique geology and lighting. The dive boats were small, overloaded and difficult to gear-up in ... sitting on the gunwale with your tank cantilevered out over the water. Boat crews do not speak English. There is no toilet on any dive boat for full- and half-day trips. The fuel surcharges are high if venturing beyond the small circle around the resort. Sorong airport is primitive and difficult. In all monetary exchanges, every attempt is made to discount US currency. Any mark or fold reduced the value 20%-30%. Overweight luggage charges were high and currency hassles continued in regard to departure tax. The lunch and

dinner food was monotonously the same every day. They claim that duck, lamb and venison have been added but they will just cook it the same way and it will be just as unappealing. Desserts were the pits! These cooks need to go to chef school. We just looked at each other as the food was placed on the table and felt bad for the British couple with a three-year contract there. There were no ice cubes. On the way home, a large cassowary was walking down the main street in Sorong. Max said they are adorable as chicks and imprint on a family, following everywhere. If the family goes diving, the cassowary sticks his head under the water to see where they went. Dive operations used to pay village chiefs to dive their reefs. The Indonesian government got upset and required the fees to be paid to the government ... you know where that leads! The chiefs can prohibit divers from using their reefs. Villages do not get the monetary support they need or were accustomed to receiving ... just a bad scene at the basic level. There seems to be a big disconnect between the government and the services received by the citizens. I mailed photos to the British couple as soon as I got home in May and they still have not arrived. The infrastructure is poor or absent in regard to roads and bridges. You pass the Pertamina Hospital where Larry Smith died on your way from the airport to the island-hopping boat for the two-hour ride to Kri Island from Sorong. The bungalows were plenty roomy for working on gear. No fresh water rinse for your gear or for you. My regulators got more corroded in one week than in 35 years of use. I sponged my cameras with bottled water. In the September 2003 issue of Undercurrent, projection was that by winter, the resort was to have "unlimited fresh water, large

photographer's facility, menu choices in a large restaurant and a research center" ... four years later, none of this was there. Lots of ID books are available in the library and there is a big gathering area where we sat before dinner, going over identifications and sharing photos and videos. One couple had visited primitive tribes on mainland New Guinea and showed their videos. Internet connections are poor and slow, as in Wakatobi.

Sulawesi

Celebes Divers, Mapia Resort, May 2007, Carl Scott (cdscott@swbell.net), Spring, TX. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm. This was my 3rd visit with these nice folks. Unfortunately, the marine biologist, Massimo, is gone, however, the staff learned a lot from him. The Indonesian guides, Tony and Bernard, will quote you scientific names for many of the interesting creatures and the local guides are experienced and have good eyes. There are no cushions on the boats. Bring plenty of sunscreen and use it often. Just the few minutes that you will accumulate at the surface and getting to and from the boat each day will be enough to give most folks a decent tan! Bungalows are basic but clean and functional, with plenty of room for 2 divers in each. Roberto is rebuilding the older ones a few at a time, and the newer ones are nice. This is an all-inclusive resort, owned by one person, though the dive operation has a separate identity due to historical development of the operation. Food is plentiful and good. Expect fresh grilled fish and/or calamari each day. The sister island resort on Siladen, where lunch is taken daily, is a beach lover's paradise. You want it? Just ask for it. If it exists

here, they will find a way to get it for you. If not, just relax and remember that you're not in Kansas. UW Photography Comments: While no fresh water is provided (unless you ask for it) on the boats, there is plenty of safe, shaded storage area on these large boats, and your bungalow is so close to the dock that shore facilities are moot. As for subject matter, you will find more reef fish than you could ever give your attention to, as well as abundant macro subjects.

Gangga Island Resort, May 2007, Steven Levin, Arlington, VA. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 35 to 90 Feet. Water: 80 to 84 F, calm. This was my seventh trip to Gangga Island Resort (GIR). High quality of accommodation, food, and diving operations. GIR supports people who are non-divers as well as divers. The resort has white sand beaches with lots of shaded areas with lounging bales. Diving from GIR is diversified given its location off of the tip of Northern Sulawesi. In the area of GIR there is diving at Bangka and Talisan Islands as well as the coast of Northern Sulawesi. These areas offer dives at locations such as Batu Gosoh (Bangka), Batu Tiga (Bangka), and Pulisan (N. Sulawesi) that provide environments extremely rich in invertebrates — soft corals, sponges, tunicates, etc. Other dive sites provide muck diving opportunities such as HBO Point and Paradise Reef. All the dive sites provide a broad range of creatures including frogfish, leaf scorpionfish, many diverse species of nudibranchs, orangutan crabs, pipefish, etc. Diving is done from boats built by GIR on the island. The boats are comfortable and fast. Four boats have on-board toilets and fast/quiet four-stroke engines. Since the resort is effectively located between Bunaken and Lembeh Straits,

they are able to offer day trips providing divers three dives at either of these locations and reach them in one hour. Anywhere from 1 to 4 guests per guide. They are installing an in-house Nitrox system as well as satellite-based WiFi, they say by the end of 2007. GIR is reached by flying to Manado. Most people fly direct from Singapore on SilkAir — a three-hour flight. It is then a 1+ hour drive and 20-minute boat ride to the resort. UW Photography Comments: On shore there is a large and well-equipped facility for charging and camera maintenance.

Gangga Island Resort, August 2007, Rick Cavanaugh (rick@rickcavanaugh.com), Ellicott City, MD.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 75 Feet. Water: 78 to 84 F, calm, choppy, currents, no currents. Getting to Gangga is fairly easy from Singapore to Manado. Gangga picks you up at Manado airport and takes you for a 45-minute ride to a dock where you board their boat for a 30-minute ride. The rooms are clean and spread out along their white sandy beach. Housekeeping makes up/cleans the rooms 2 times per day. Most of the staff speaks English and are limited in what they understand. The food is a combination of toned down Indonesian food (not spicy) and good Italian food. Most days there was a choice of a fish or a meat (pork, chicken or beef). Each meal included a soup, pasta, dessert, etc. Beer, wine, soda, iced tea and such were extra. Their prices for drinks averaged about \$5 to \$8US. The resort is somewhat isolated, so there are no other restaurants to explore. The diving was done from their Indonesian-style wooden boats (all resorts in the area use the same style boats), not the most comfortable. Each boat had 1 or 2 plastic containers for cameras and a separate container for masks. All gear

was brought onto the boat and cared for by the staff. Depth limits stated, but not really enforced. Typically the dives were a maximum depth of 80 feet. My deepest depth was 100 feet. Most of the good things to see are shallower than 60 feet. On one dive, the dive guide continued searching for critters even though 1 diver signaled low air and started his safety stop. We joined this diver as he was about to run out of air. The dive guide joined us after surfacing and wanted to know why we did not follow him. We were there during the full moon. During the night dive the currents were so strong it was hard to maintain any control. Within 15 minutes during the same dive, the current would stop. During the day dives the currents were not as bad. Tidal depth changes about 6 feet. Low tide is around 12 noon to 1 p.m. After one dive, the dive boat was unable to get to the dock due to the low water. They brought us around to the side of the island and dropped us off next to the reef. We had to walk across the exposed, semi-exposed and submerged reef, getting cut up in the process. We could have easily swum in next to the dock, which had a sandy bottom. The boat is split up and goes out in several groups separated by several minutes. Typically there was 2 to 4 divers per dive guide. The dive guides did a fairly good job pointing out critters, but they were rough on the sea life. You must sign a statement before diving about handling, feeding and harassing sea life, but this is totally ignored by the dive guides. I saw them pick up anemones and flip them upside-down for a photographer to get a picture of a shrimp. They handled just about every crinoid they saw, looking for squat lobsters; after you have seen a dozen or so, it is well overdue to leave the crinoids alone.

The dive guides were frequently seen rubbing the remains of the crinoids off their hands. One dive guide brought along his own camera and took pictures during the dive, thus adding one more person to hog the critter to be viewed. Gangga is about 90 minutes from Bunaken, which has wonderful wall dives and more fish life. About 30 minutes from Sulawesi, 40 minutes from Bangka with pinnacle diving, 60 minutes from Talisei, and about 90 minutes from Lembeh, with wonderful muck diving. Generally speaking, the area is overfished and there is not much large sea life. I did see a bump head parrot fish and a Napoleon wrasse. I did not see any sharks or large rays. Bunaken had the prettiest reef, with a beautiful wall with lots of color and life. There was a large turtle, well over 500 lbs. Lots of healthy corals, nudibranchs, crabs, and other critters. Bangka had colorful pinnacles with good coral growth. It did show some damage from aggressive divemasters trying to find critters. A fair amount of the bubble coral and frog spawn/hammer corals showed signs of necrosis. The dive guides were rough on this coral, trying to find shrimps and lobsters. Talisei had some nice sites as well; however, another guest said that they saw evidence of cyanide fishing in Talisei during one of their dives. Lembeh is fantastic muck diving. We did 2 dives here and they dropped us off at Lembeh Resort for the second part of our trip. UW Photography Comments: Good camera room; each boat had 1 to 2 rinse buckets for cameras.

Gangga Island Resort, August 2007, Michael Emerson (medas2005@msn.com), Eden Prairie, MN. Experience:

251-500 dives. Vis: 60 to 100 Feet.

Water: 80 to 82 F, choppy. Compared to the three-day ordeal we had to get from Minneapolis, the 3-hour journey

from Lembeh Resort to Gangga was a piece of cake. The last kilometer of the road to the Gangga jetty was a bit of an adventure. I would hate to see what that dirt trail looks like after a rain! The atmosphere of the resort was entirely different from Lembeh Resort, where we had spent the first week of our Sulawesi adventure. It is much larger and spread out so it can be a pretty good walk to the bungalows in the back of the resort. The beach and views and beautiful. The bungalows were roomy and had AC and a TV in the room. (The TV had HBO and the Discover channel on every single channel except for one channel of CNN Asia.) It was much like a resort you might find in the Caribbean but with cheaper drinks. The clientele is definitely European and primarily Italian because of the GM, who is from Italy. We saw one other American couple during the week. Unlike Lembeh Resort, which is purely for divers, this was much more of a mixed activity group that included some families and a lot of couples where only one member dived. This is a good place to show off your summer resort fashion, although half of the audience wore their T-shirts and swimming suits to eat as well. The food was always good and the choices were enough to please anyone. We did not use the spa facilities, but they looked nice. The massage beds were overlooking the soft turquoise waters of the Sulawesi Sea. It looked like a great alternative for the non-divers at the resort. This is a big-time dive operation with a fleet of 10+ boats, several of which were capable of pretty good distance to Lembeh and Bunaken. The resort location was ideal for anyone wanting a good taste of North Sulawesi diving. The boats were quite large and all had an onboard head. They could reach the sites in the area within

45 minutes to an hour in nearly all cases. Everything seemed well run and organized. Typically dive boats left at 8:00 A.M. and came back at lunch after two dives. The afternoon dive was at 3:00, a Mandarin fish dive at 5:00 and a night dive at 7:00. The dive guides were a bit uneven, but generally good. They assigned one guide to my son and me, and he was always looking for good photographic subjects. He even had his own digital camera and took some nice shots of us while diving, which made a nice addition to the fish shots that I took. We had a couple of challenging dive sites and they got us back in the boat in an efficient manner. The resort did well to serve the needs of divers of a wide range of skill levels. The facilities for underwater photography were also first rate. They always had some tubs of water on the boat to place our cameras in after every dive. We had a bench in a dive photography room for all of our gear and plenty of plugs of all shapes and voltage. My son was even able to charge his Nintendo game, which required 110 amps. The diving was good, although the lack of any bigger fish was disappointing. The walls at Bunaken were beautiful, and we saw some large Napoleon wrasse and a big turtle in the distance. The coral throughout the area was healthy and colorful. The island of Bangka has several nice sites with beautiful topography and a couple of spectacular pinnacles. We did learn that while August is considered high season, it is also a windy time and it does limit visits to some of the better sites that are not wind-protected. The resort has a great Mandarin fish dive, which I found to be the best I have seen. It has a nice place to steady yourself for photos and the night we were there, the fish were definitely in the mood for love, even though it was a full moon. There are

several nice dive sites at Pulisan on the main island of Sulawesi that are well wind-protected. Unfortunately, these can be overvisited if the wind persists. On one dive, we saw several varieties of rare nudis, a clown frogfish, and three kinds of ghost pipefish. The coral reefs were generally in good shape and provided great vistas for wide angle photography. It doesn't get much better than Bangka and Bunaken. There were plenty of macro subjects as well, just no fish bigger than a large angel fish.

Kasawari, October 2006, Pat Watson (pwatson@brightok.net), Eucha, OK.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm, no currents. Opened in August '06. There were only three other divers there, all well known underwater photographers who have been "everywhere." It is superior, in every way. (See resort pictures at www.tonywublog.com by clicking on the second site there, dated September 16 '06, and then to the "Back to North Sulawesi" entry.) There are only ten villas, accommodating 20 divers. Villas 1 and 2 have decks and gazebos out over the water, and are significantly larger than the others, with enormous two-sink bathrooms. 11 villas have both indoor and outdoor state-of-the-art showers with seemingly unlimited very hot water. Rooms are equipped with mini-bars and coffee makers, and will have broadband internet soon. We were in Villa #1, which is right next to the infinity swimming pool. Morning coffee on our deck gazebo was so special, watching the sunrise and fishing boats. It's a photographer's heaven. The large camera room is right above the dock. It has 17 work stations, each with two charging points and storage shelf. Crew brings cameras to and from the camera room to the boat in individual baskets which are placed on the boat

in locked down storage spots, so that they are secure and protected from other cameras, gear, etc. Crew rinses cameras in the baskets. The huge and beautifully outfitted dive platform has immense rinsing tanks specifically for wetsuits, cameras, etc. Three dive boats have enclosed front areas for return trip comfort out of the wind. You never handle gear. I am 75, and the crew was eager to help me up, lifting the tank and making sure I felt no strain on my back. At the end of every dive, you are greeted with a hot, steaming towel for face and head, a dry towel for wrapping up in, water and fresh fruit. Hot chocolate on night dives! Be prepared: the water can be cold. My three mil suit, which I have worn comfortably all over Indonesia, even in the cold waters of Komodo, was not enough, and I rented a 5 mil from the resort. Bob was fine in his 3-5-3. But other reviews in the Chapbook give warmer water temps, so this may have been colder than usual. Staff is totally concerned with meeting your every need. Charming Anita is your hostess, greeting you with her dynamite smile and personality. The dive guides are terrific, and know the area thoroughly. Lembeh has perhaps the most spectacular muck diving in the world. Chapbook reviews of the other resorts list the hard-to-find critters in detail, so I won't duplicate all that. Particularly memorable for me was the discovery of so many incredibly beautiful Banggai cardinalfish sharing the anemones with a wide variety of anemone fish. Other outstanding sightings: two free-swimming 8- to 10-foot long eels on a night dive, one a lovely white snake eel, and one not in the books, and that no-one could name — a lovely greenish blue, with tiny black fins on either side just behind the head. Flying gurnards everywhere, some-

times in groups, putting on impressive shows with "wings" extended, a brilliant yellow rhinopias, all manner of frog fish, and a free-swimming stargazer, who promptly buried himself in the sand. There are also several lovely reefs where you see all the usual reef fish and beautiful corals. We flew Singapore Airlines' new Economy Plus, non-stop flight from LAX to Singapore. Really roomy, comfortable seats, 80 "movie on demand" channels, knee and footrests, complimentary alcohol and non-alcohol drinks, and those gorgeous and so smilingly attentive flight attendants. Take advantage of Singapore Airlines' Stopover Holiday program to get half price or more off your hotel, airport transfer, and many other benefits. From Singapore we flew to Manado and then to Sorong in Papua, as we were revisiting Raja Ampat on the Grand Komodo Tours and Dives live-aboard, Putri Papua. After Raja Ampat we returned to Manado for the van road trip and a short boat ride to the Kasawari Lembeh Resort. The transfer comes with your Kasawari package. The nicest hotel in Manado is the beautiful new Quality Hotel. Most others are pretty pitiful. UW Photography Comments: Best ever seen by myself or professional underwater photographers who were there with us. Camera room with 17 stations, each with 2 charge points and storage shelf. Cameras brought to and from boat in individual baskets by the crew and placed in lock-down spots on boat where nothing could bump against them. Rinsed in giant tanks by crew.

Kasawari, February 2007, Mel McCombie (mmccombie@aol.com), New Haven, CT. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 75 to 10 Feet. Water: 78 to 81 F, calm, currents. This new resort is a diver's paradise. The villas are lovely and spacious, made of

local hardwoods and decorated with beautiful textiles. We booked a villa over the water and enjoyed the deck but the standard villas are virtually identical, just lacking the deck. All have indoor and outdoor showers, mini bars, fridges, and lots of storage space. Towels are huge and all-cotton, as are the comfortable bed linens (on good quality mattresses, too). The resort itself has WiFi at a pretty reasonable cost; one must bring one's own laptop as there is no common computer for the guests. Nus Lobbu, famed DM in Lembeh, is the resort manager and the dive operation is built from the water up to meet every need. There are 6 huge rinse tanks, 4 just for cameras; lots of space for wetsuits, BCDs, etc.; 2 piping hot showers near the rinse tanks and 2 complete changing rooms with toilets and their own showers. They have three dive boats, and since the resort only has 12 villas, there are never more than 8 divers per boat. As one emerges, a crew member hands you a steaming face cloth scented with lemongrass to wipe the salt off your face; then he offers you cold water and a fruit plate! The briefing area has a board where divers can write in their wish list critters, and with only one exception, the list was fulfilled. The crew washes your gear after every dive and when it is hung up overnight, industrial fans help to dry it out by morning. (I am not writing about the diving in Lembeh on the assumption that anyone going there knows what it's like!) The food at the resort was pretty good. Like sister resorts in the Strait, you give your breakfast, lunch and dinner orders before diving, chosen from an extensive menu. The dining area is attractive and breezy; there is a nice bar; but if you like wine, bring your own. It is hard to find in the area (we stopped en route from the airport to the resort and bought some). The only thing

lacking at Kasawari are spa facilities, but given how much diving one does, when would you have the time? This dedicated dive resort is the best we have ever experienced, luxurious yet aimed at divers. My hat (hood) is off to them. 4 huge dedicated camera rinse tanks, lots of space, and a dedicated room for photographers with outlets, transformers, and yet more space!

Kasawari, September 2007, Debbie Husby (deb29palms@verizon.net), Twentynine Palms, CA. Experience:

501-1000 dives. Vis: 20 Feet. Water: 81 F, calm. This resort is the height of understated luxury. The service, food, and staff were outstanding. The rooms were large and well appointed, grounds are going to be absolutely gorgeous in another year or two. This is a new resort, built from the ground up for discriminating underwater photographers. Nus, the manager, was the best DM I've ever had. He's been kicked up into management, but still tries to dive with each group. His DMs have worked alongside him for years; Ali, Deddy, and Wilson are absolutely great. The boat rides were short, which is good (no heads on boats). Divers handed up their cameras and took their gear off in the water to be handed up to staff. When climbing up onto boat, we were greeted with warm washcloths, a cup of water, and a dry towel. Snacks were ample and good. Boats returned to resort between dives to allow for camera changes, downloads, and fresh batteries. The changing area was lovely, with huge rinse tanks with fresh water that was changed frequently. The food was great, allowing for all tastes. Bring your own batteries, as supplies in Bitung (nearest town) are somewhat limited. Also, bring your bug spray; mosquitoes are the size of birds here. Wireless internet access throughout the resort. UW Photogra-

phy Comments: Cameras were treated with utmost care on boat, transported between camera room and boat by staff. Camera room was perfect, with work and storage stations for every diver. Work stations were at a perfect height, plenty of dry towels, compressed air, electrical strips, both 110 and 220. Well lit area with a security guard present. Viewing area for completed work on TV upstairs. DMs were exceptional at showing photogenic critters.

Kungkungan Bay Resort, April 2007, Ed and Julia DeMartini, Kaneohe, HI.

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 60 Feet. Water: 81 to 82 F, calm. The best muck diving dive adventure we've had! Meeting practically all of Ed's expectations and more, since this year's dive trip is muck and only muck. There were only a few small critters on our list that we did not encounter that we did see in other trips to Indonesia and PNG. Thus, we were not disappointed except for the bobbit worm. We saw that monster once on a night dive on our 2000 KBR stay We saw wonderpus, mimic octopus, giant octopus, long arm octopus, blue ring octopus, coconut octopus, harlequin ghost pipe fish, ornate ghost pipefish, robust ghost pipefish, ambon scorpion fish, many devilfish with multi-colors, electric clams, cat and bamboo sharks, numerous nudibranchs, comet fish, crocodile fishes, many shapes, sizes and colors of frogfishes, pigmy seahorses, many cockroach-shaped mini-shrimps and crabs on crinoids, sea cucumbers and melabys, Mandarin fish, sea snakes, stargazers, harlequin shrimp, squids and so on. Wow! Our host at KBR, Steve, was helpful and accommodating, even when he was too busy. Every guide was superb; they were waiting nearby with the next critter when we finished filming one. We did a night dive every

day in addition to the 3 day dives. Minahassa Lagoon was more laid back for diving, but the hosts were accommodating and our dive guide was knowledgeable. When we challenged him with finding us a mimic octopus and ambon scorpion fish to see if he could match the KBR guides, he did indeed find both at Poopoh on the first day! And he also located a brilliantly pink leaf scorpion fish. The setting was luxurious and the dive pace was not as hectic as KBR. KBR dive guides and boat crew we encountered were experienced and careful in handling camera gear. Dedicated rinse tank and dunk tank to test camera setup. Well lighted and provisioned camera room with both 110V and 220V battery charging stations. Dedicated towels for cameras were provided. Air tank for cleaning and/or drying camera and accessories. Screen door to block out mosquitoes and other unwanted critters. Bathroom adjacent to camera room. Dive guides are superb and kind of treated like 'rock stars' at KBR. We rarely encountered other non-KBR dive groups in the water during our 10 days there. But when we did, invariably, other divers seemed to recognize the KBR label on the dive guides' wet suits and proceeded to follow us around. Generally, we had one guide to the 2 of us until we were joined. Nevertheless, the KBR guides are gracious and professional about this. Liberty saved J. from being impaled by a giant, ugly, and well camouflaged stone fish while filming a pair of nudibranchs.

Kungkungan Bay Resort, June 2007, Gary Krippendorf (gskrippendorf@hotmail.com), Redwood City, CA.

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 60 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm. I planned the Lembah Strait portion of our trip via telephone and e-mail with Linda at the Kungkungan Bay Resort (KBR)

office. Linda was good at answering our questions, and she also arranged for our transfer to the Santika Hotel from KBR. KBR resort was generally in good shape. Our group occupied 5 of the cottage suite rooms, which are a good size and have an enclosed porch. Unfortunately, all 5 of the rooms had active termites, which were flying around in our rooms at night. In the morning, the floor and sheets had areas where the results of their nocturnal activities were quite visible. The weekly fumigations we were told about didn't seem to be effective. I agree with the March 2007 issue of Undercurrent regarding the need for the housekeeping staff to aggressively clean the bathroom areas exhibiting black mold. While everyone in the group had a good time, several mentioned that the breakfast and lunch offerings were high on carbohydrates and low on protein. The amount of meat was reduced in comparison to the same meals 11 months ago. The dinners were on a par to our 2004 and 2006 experiences. Lembeh Strait is known for its muck diving and strange critters. The water was smooth and most boat rides were 10-15 minutes to the dive sites. Our maximum depth was 90 feet, though we spent most of our time between 30 and 60 feet. There were 8 of us in the boat, along with the boat captain and 2 or 3 dive guides. On prior trips, we had had a maximum of 6 divers per boat, so the boat was a bit crowded. Before each dive we get a briefing for the site, which included a list of the critters usually seen in that location. Our dive guides usually were able to find everything on the list, and many more exotic fish as well. They were patient and made sure we had seen each critter before moving on to the next area at the dive site. Ade was the dive guide assigned to me and three

others, and he was wonderful. There were so many different things on each dive that we couldn't begin to log them. Some of us were taking digital photographs, which was a big help, because it provided a record of what we saw with a date and timestamp so we could match the photos to the dive sites. The diving was excellent. The staff members were all friendly and all worked hard at their jobs. They were willing to help us whenever we asked for anything. However, the overall experience was not quite as good as we had on our recent prior visits. Some of the group wondered if the changes we noticed were due to a cost cutting-effort by the management. UW Photography Comments: Small boats did not have any facilities for cameras. Cameras were safely handled and stored in a plastic basket. Shore facilities are excellent.

Kungkungan Bay Resort, June 2007, Terry Gee (TGeeVet@aol.com), El Paso, TX. Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 20 to 40 Feet. Water: 79 to 82 F, calm. I saw more exotic creatures on each dive than I have seen the rest of my entire dive career. In the sites where there is coral, it is spectacular, but the reason to go is for the muck diving. The resort is a beautiful facility with a friendly staff who go that extra mile to help all the guests and make their stay memorable. The managers are enthusiastic about their work and it shows in every detail of their operation. They are currently undergoing a major update and remodeling of the facility. UW Photography Comments: No rinse tanks in boats but dive sites were just a few minutes from the resort, where an entire room was provided for camera equipment, charging, etc.

Kungkungan Bay Resort, August 2007, Diane Lake (dianelake@earthlink.net),

Mt. Center, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 10 to 50 Feet. Water: 80 to 81 F, calm, choppy. Good service, friendly folks, good and varied food ... as much as you want, whenever you want, it's all inclusive but for drinks. I stayed in the same type cottage as I had before and now they are showing a bit of wear. Also, the newer ones have A/C; this one could use it too. It did have 2 overhead fans and the open windows only for air movement. Some bugs due to open windows. Grounds are beautiful and your veranda views couldn't be prettier, looking out onto the Lembeh Strait. Swimming pool with waterfall is new to me. I have never seen so many wonderful, crazy-looking, interesting creatures! And so small you need a magnifying glass to see them. Last time that's exactly what they gave me to use, but they no longer passed them out. You will see pygmy seahorses (maybe not ...they are so tiny, but if you had a magnifying glass ...) about 1/2 inch long and the same color as the coral they are attached to. Flying gurnards, many types of lion fish, lots of frogfish, even the hairy frogfish, ribbon eels, cardinal fish, leaf scorpion, mimic octopus, sweetlips, one of my favorites ... the beautiful little Mandarin fish, flamboyant cuttlefish. Boat rides are only 5 to 15 minutes. The dive guides are fantastic; they know where everybody lives. Fresh fruit on board. All gear is taken care of and is waiting for you on the boats each day. The house reef is great, so be sure to take advantage of stepping out your front door for a great dive.

Kungkungan Bay Resort, September 2007, Lesa Perrault, Bothell, WA.

Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, calm. I went back with a group of 14, and we had 4 repeat travelers. The staff is the best in the business, both at the resort and on

the boats. Most of them remembered us from last year and addressed us by our first names. We had a pretty boisterous group, and as the staff got to know us better, they became involved in all our antics. The diving is exceptional, a "4" for inexperienced divers only because buoyancy is a must. There are lots of scorpion fish and other strange creatures beneath the sand, and you don't want to land on one! I never though I would get tired of seeing pygmy seahorses, frog fish, cuttlefish, octopus, or eels, but after a while that you actually do. UW Photography Comments: Special room just for cameras. 220v and 110v both available. Clean towels always available, and lots of counter space to spread out your equipment. Special tub on shore just for cameras. When you have your camera all ready to go, you place it in the tub, and somehow it always makes it to your boat. Dive staff is respectful of your equipment and treats it as if it were their own. When boat returns to shore, they return your cameras to the tub, ready for you to prepare for next dive.

Lembeh Resort, September 2006, James Jenkins, San Francisco, CA.

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 25 to 50 Feet. Water: choppy. Here's a partial list from just my first day (3 dives): electric scallop, winged pipefish, Pegasus sea moth, xeno crab, cockatoo wasp fish, leaf scorpion fish, mantis shrimp, Randall's goby, various cardinal fish, razor fish, dragonets, flying gurnards, painted frog fish, ornate ghost pipe fish, blue ribbon eels in all phases (black, blue, yellow), rhinopiis (one pink, one green), two giant frog fish, coconut octopus, false stone fish, tons of nudibranchs, lion fish, and scorpion fish. (Don't expect large fish, sharks, or rays.) There is a dusk dive on the house reef that delivers mandarin fish, and

also a decent night dive. Night dives are offered every night with a minimum of two divers. All were good to excellent — Bobbitt worms, coconut octopus out hunting, cuttle fish, free-swimming snake eel, pluerobranchs, hairy frog fish, devil scorpion fish, stargazers. Ask for Nudi Falls. Generally, the water was calm but we had strong (20-25 knot) winds which created chop and also added to heat loss traveling to and from dive sites (given wet wetsuits). Visibility ranged from 25' to 50' on most muck sites and improved to 80'+ on the sites further north up the straight. The diving is not challenging and currents, when present, are mild. Beginners (50-100 dives) can do these dives, but should work hard on buoyancy before going and learn to keep legs up and bent when kicking near the bottom. While a beginner can do most of the dives, he is likely to ruin much of the diving for other guests by stirring up the bottom, etc. All diving is from large boats which generally took up to 8 divers (two groups of 4 with guides). Entry is via a back roll and return is up a ladder; they will hoist your weights and tank if you wish. Water temperatures ranged from 75° to 79° F and there were some thermoclines and currents with even colder water. Keep in mind that you will not be very active on most dives and take the proper rubber! The resort is beautifully laid out. The dining room has views of the straight and jungle. There is a small media room with two computers with Internet access. The older rooms are a comfortable walk and climb from the main area; the new accommodations have great views and breezes but are quite a hike! (While we returned to our room several times a day, we did take dry bathing suits down to avoid the hike between morning dives.) Many of us used the pool

for a rinse and sunning between dives. There are padded chaise lounges and beach towels. We principally dove with Ronald. He was terrific! On occasion we dove with other guides and they were all attentive, great at spotting critters, and very helpful. Everything from transfers from/to the airport in Manado to room cleanliness was as good as any resort we've been to. We'll definitely return. UW Photography comments: There is a huge camera room next to the dive lockers. I don't think it would have been crowded if two-thirds of the guests had cameras. 220 and 110 volts are available; clean towels are supplied. There are computers with USB ports and CD writers. On the boats there was a large shelf area for cameras — again, enough room for 6 or more outfits for 8 divers.

Lembeh Resort, September 2006, Rick Cavanaugh (rick@rickcavanaugh.com), Ellicott City, MD. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 15 to 30 Feet. Water: 78 to 84 F, calm, no currents. We arrived via boat from Gangga Island via Gangga Islands dive boat. Lembeh Resort is a pretty resort on a hilly area. If you have a problem with stairs, request rooms 5-8. Rooms 10-12 have many stairs to climb every day. Room 7 is the closest to the kitchen and you will hear them every morning, but it is also one of the shortest walks. The rooms are large and clean but they are trying to be a 4 star resort so the rooms could use a little more attention to cleaning. Lembeh is a black sand area and it is more of a jungle type of environment. The food is a combination of authentic Indonesian food — spicy noodles and curries. Breakfast and lunch were served buffet-style. Dinner was ordered at lunch time from a menu. Food overall was excellent. Drinks such as beer, wine, mixed drinks, sodas etc, were

extra. There are no other restaurants, and thus, no exploring local foods. The diving was done from their Indonesian-style wooden boats (all resorts in this area use the same style boats), not the most comfortable. Entries are via a giant stride or a back roll and a ladder to return. There were no camera rinse tanks on the boats, but none are really needed as the boat returns to shore for the surface interval. There were large rinse tanks on shore dedicated to cameras. All gear was brought onto the boat and cared for by the staff. There is no dock for the dive boats, so entries and exits from the boat are wet. They have one dock used when you arrive. There are shore showers, restrooms and a dive locker dress area within 50 feet of the boats. Your gear is stored here. Everyone gets suited up before boarding the boat. Most dive sites are 10 to 15 minutes away. Most people come to Lembeh for the muck diving; thus, few dives are done on the reefs. Most muck dives were black sandy slopes that varied from 10 feet to 80 feet. There was a fair amount of trash: bottles, cans, wood, burlap sacks and such. There were small coral areas. I have never seen so many frog fish, scorpion fish, and pipe fish in my life. After a few days, frog fish were boring and you start looking for better things. Much of the fish life looks like it was made for a Star Wars movie. Diving was fairly easy, with the dive guides being excellent. They were respectful of the sea life and I never saw them rough handle anything. A video diver who beat the hell out of the reef trying to video the rhinopias. I saw this guy break more coral with his fins on one dive than I have seen in 300 dives. He even knocked over a 2-foot-tall sponge! I complained to the dive staff and they pulled him aside and counseled him. The remaining dives

with him, the dive guide spent the time to assure he would do no more damage. Things we saw: rhinopias, giant frog fish, baby frog fish, clown frog fish, pygmy seahorses, seahorses, ornate ghost pipe fish, banded pipe fish, leaf fish, crocodile fish, at least 20 different nudibranchs, ribbon eels, sea wasps, flying gurnards, sweet lips, cockatoo wasp fish plus much more. I did not see, although other divers did: wonderpus, mimic octopus star gazer. All dive guides have slates where they write the names of the critters they find. Our dive guide would even write in Japanese for the Japanese guests! The house reef is an easy dive to about 60 feet and has a fair amount of life. Lembeh Divers allow one free shore dive for every 2 boat dives. The first one is guided. After 4 or 5 days, I think I would be ready to see a healthy coral reef with no garbage.

Lembeh Resort, August 2007, Michael Emerson (medsa2005@msn.com), Eden Prairie, MN. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 Feet. Water: 80 to 82 F, currents. Our plane was broken in Minneapolis so we were five hours late and as a result, made it to Tokyo instead of Singapore on day one. But we were denied entry onto the plane to Manado because I didn'tt have a totally blank visa page in my passport. So we raced off to the U.S. embassy and got more pages added. We then got a standby flight to Jakarta (three hours in a smoke-infested airport was more than enough) and got a Lion Air flight to Manado. Thanks to the help of the GM at Lembeh Resort, we finally got into our bed about 2:30 A.M. on the same day that we had planned to be there 12 hours earlier. We had a spacious and comfortable bungalow whose only negative was that it was perched with a beautiful view about 15 meters above sea level, so lots of steep steps. It had a

beautiful balcony for reflecting on what dive to do next. We watched the sun go down behind a large volcano was beautiful every day. The food was a good solid B+ and they were quite willing to accommodate my son, who is a picky eater. It had a nice pool and a recently opened spa, which we did not try. We never had more than 5 or 6 divers on a boat and we always had one dive guide for two of us. The dive guides spent their time looking for the critters that we came to see and they were good at. Each dive began with a nice briefing and we were treated like adults (even my young son!) and allowed to dive our computers until it was time to end the dive. About half of the dive sites were pure, wide open black sand with only a few scraps of garbage and coral rubble to interrupt the view. Nothing quite like being startled by the appearance of an ornate ghost pipefish or a wonderpus to interrupt the black sand. Several sites were classic South Pacific coral landscapes, as pretty as anything that I have seen in Fiji or the Solomons.. We visited a Japanese freighter wreck, the Malawi, which was interesting as well. We saw the elusive flamboyant cuttlefish, rhinopias; lots of nudis, a showy wonderpus, several nice-sized seahorses and several pygmy ones and we saw an ornate ghost pipefish and his/her baby. Our only missing targets were the blue ringed octopus and a harlequin shrimp.

Tasik Ria Resort, June 2007, Terry Gee (TGeeVet@aol.com), El Paso, TX.

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 75 to 100 Feet. Water: 80 to 83 F, calm. Tasik Ria Resort is unbelievably beautiful. They are well staffed, provide unsurpassed service and will do anything they can to make their guests happy. The dive operation is interested in sustainable utilization of the dive sites, reefs and the environment. The entire

crew of the dive facility, located on site at Tasik Ria, strives to be the best.

Thalassa Dive Center, Hotel Santika, June 2007, Gary Krippendorf (gskrippendorf@hotmail.com), Redwood City, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives.

Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 84 to 86 F, calm, no currents. North of the city of Manado and adjacent to Bunaken National Park. I planned the Bunaken portion of our trip via e-mail with Simone, the general manager of the Thalassa Dive Center. Simone was good at answering our questions via e-mail, and we booked a 7-night all-inclusive package. She took care of everything, including arranging for our rooms at the Santika Hotel, bus transfer to the Manado airport, etc. We checked into our rooms, got our SCUBA gear and headed to the dive center for an orientation. The Santika Hotel and the two restaurants were good. The restaurants had a mix of western and Asian dishes. Breakfast was a full buffet at the main restaurant, lunch was served at the dive center, and dinner was at one of the two restaurants or room service. The massages available through the hotel were great. The 8 of us were assigned to our own boat, with the same boat captain and dive guides for most of our 6 days of diving. The water was smooth and most boat rides were 15-20 minutes to the dive sites. Our maximum depth at Bunaken was 100 feet, though we spent most of our time between 50 and 70 feet. There was a mix of walls and fields of coral. On all of our dives, there were large schools of small and mid-sized fish everywhere. Lionfish, blue ribbon eels, and the many varieties of anemone fish were among my favorites. Our dive masters give good pre-dive briefings, which told us about the site and what kinds of things we'd see. Rarely were they wrong. Usually, we saw far more

than promised. Four of us did two of the 3-tank all-day trips to Bangka, while four of the group only went once. The dive sites at Bangka have more soft corals than the sites in Bunaken, so if you want a bit more variety, the Bangka trip is well worth the \$20 per person fuel surcharge.

Thalassa Dive Center, Hotel Santika, August 2007, Diane Lake (dianelake@earthlink.net), Mt. Center, CA. Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 90 Feet. Water: 84 F, calm. Hotel Santika was pleasant, being clean and well maintained. It is not a dedicated "dive hotel," so there is a variety of guests and goings-on. Two restaurants, both quite slow; food-wise, the Bigtree Cafe was the better of the two. Thalassa Dive Center is a walk down from the hotel, and you continue beyond to the dock, which is quite a walk down a long plank pier spanning mangroves. Dive briefings were good, as were our dive guides, Maxi, Marco, and German. attentive and good at finding critters. They have come across a new pygmy seahorse which is even smaller than the regular pygmy. hard to see this 1/4-inch seahorse, not only due to its size, but it's color matched the coral exactly. Lionfish, flying gurnards, flamboyant cuttlefish, dragon seahorses, ghost pipefish, a plethora of beautiful, colorful corals and reef fish.

Wakatobi Resort, October 2006, Henry and Carol Ziller (caziller@hotmail.com), Conifer, CO. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 60 to 80 Feet. Water: 78 to 80 F, calm. Singapore Airlines has spoiled us for using any US carrier. Not only is there more leg room, seat recline and foot rests (in coach) they never stop bringing food and drink — and all with a smile. Seven-hour layover in Singapore, where we got a room at

the Transit Hotel inside the airport for \$65US. Not having to leave the secured area was a great convenience. The Singapore Airport is truly world-class; it has a movie theater and swimming pool, both free, in addition to free internet access at numerous computer. And more shopping than most people can handle. They even offer a free city tour. Upon arrival in Bali, we were greeted by the Wakatobi staff, who obtained our visas for us and escorted us through customs. Escapes Ltd. arranged for the Bali portion of our trip and had a driver waiting to take us to the Ari Putri Hotel in Sanur. The Balinese are friendly, kind people. Lodging, meals, sarongs, carvings, and other souvenirs are extremely inexpensive and the Balinese are appreciative of the business. There is a lot to see and do in Bali, from diving to visiting temples to elephant rides through the jungle. For a one-hour massage you can expect to pay from \$5 and \$7US. Me the Wakatobi staff at the Denpasar Airport, Bali, whisked through security, checked our bags and were taken to the VIP room. Once at the resort, we had a briefing, then dinner, and settled into our bungalows. The bungalows were spacious and clean. We always had hot water. We were glad to have a garden unit; While the sunsets were awesome from the beach units, the sun was always shining on them and the air conditioner had a difficult time keeping the rooms cool. The four boats were 63 feet and could accommodate up to 24 people, but they only put 12 to a boat plus crew. There were always two dive masters, each taking charge of 6 divers. The boat captain had a crew of two who were quick with assistance back onto the boat, checking gear, offering towels, snacks and hot and cold drinks after each dive. The boat had two rinse buckets, one

for cameras only. The head was at deck level, which we found to be quite convenient. Boat safety features included oxygen, GPS, radio, first aid kit and life preservers. The strap holder on my wife's brand-new mask snapped on the boat just before the first dive. The crew handed her a spare mask, then attempted to repair hers — it was unfixable, but no dives were lost. Saw frog fish, pigmy seahorses, robust and ornate ghost pipefish, blue ring octopus, blue ribbon eel, and the granddaddy of all cuttlefish. Shore diving was easy, or a boat would take you out and let you drift with the current back to the resort or would come pick you up if the current changed, as it did for us. The food was always buffet but varied and delicious. Best food we have had at any dive resort, buffet or table service. Every staff member was friendly and knowledgeable and mixed with the guests even when we were not on the boat. It was nice to meet so many people from around the world. Large camera area on boats, nice camera room at longhouse, computers for downloading digital.

**Wakatobi Resort, October 2006,
Chrisanda Button/Rickie Sterne
(rickandchris@alltel.net), Elkins, AR.**

Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 70 to 90 Feet. Water: 78 F, calm, no currents. Not only is the diving beautiful and easy, the service excellent, the accommodations comfortable and spacious, and the food delicious, you get to feel good about diving from a resort that works hard to maintain good ecological practices and to integrate itself into the local communities. Take your gear to the gear shed on the day of your arrival and thereafter it will be moved from shore to boat and back again by the boat crews. The dive boats are large. Gear stations are uncrowded, and there is plenty of carpeted space for cameras to ride. Entry is by

giant stride, while reboarding is made easier by the location of ladders amidships. Boat crew set up our gear each day, quickly learning just how high each diver liked to carry his tank. They also served us water before each dive, our preferred beverage and snacks between dives. Divers are led on boat dives in groups of five or six by dive guides who are familiar with these reefs. The diving is a paradise for lovers of corals, sponges, gorgonians, and anemones, tropicals, and macro life. The sloping walls are beautiful. We actually did see pygmy seahorses. Also many crocodile fish, cuttlefish large and small, bobtail squid, nudis galore, Saron shrimp, mantis shrimp, and a number of turtles among the tropicals. The house reef is as great as reported. The only time we encountered any significant current was on a night dive on the house reef when *The Wakatobi Express* was running. The previous night we spent an hour traversing the same area of reef we were swept over in 18 minutes in the express. Our beachfront bungalow was spacious and very comfortably appointed. We used the air conditioning for about three hours each afternoon. Otherwise we opened the shutters to sea breezes and slept under cover with the ceiling fan whirring. Besides a comfortable bed and ample storage space, we enjoyed lounging areas inside on a loveseat, on the porch, and in our private chaise lounges. Drying racks on the porch were great for swimsuits. We especially appreciated the library of marine ID books on the desk right in our bungalow. Bungalows are spaced so that each seems private. Being early risers, we usually strolled over to the Longhouse before breakfast to grab a cup of the good coffee always available there and to drink it on the jetty, watching schools of fish in the shallows. The new

dining room is a beautiful structure in traditional Indonesian style. Meals are served from an attractive buffet. The variety of food satisfied a wide range of preferences. We felt we had dined in a fine restaurant with large servings all week. The Indonesian staff were so attentive, that by midweek they were mimicking our group of Southern divers' speech patterns. "Here's some water, y'all."

Wakatobi, October 2006, Phil and Patricia Tobin (philtobin6625@yahoo.com), Portland, OR.

Experience: 300 dives. Vis: 25-75 Feet. Water: 78-79 F, smooth with slight currents. First class service, comfortable quality accommodations, healthy, delicious food, hearty, viable, sustaining reefs, with quantities of fish from extra-large barracudas to pigmy seahorses. Yes, you are paying a slight premium, but it is worth every penny. We were greeted at the airport and taken straight through customs and were out of the airport within 15 minutes. No line-waiting, no customs inspection, and no hassles. We were escorted to the chartered plane for the 2.5-hour trip from Denpasar to Wakatobi. Wendy gave us the orientation and got us set up for that afternoon's first checkout dive. It was a beach entry 35 feet in front of the resort to the most magnificent wall /drift dive you can imagine. On the checkout dive, I spotted a turtle, lion fish, bump head parrot fish, and more nudibranchs than I can count. From there it only got better. We did two morning dives and one afternoon dive. The DMs were outstanding when it came to helping us find small critters, including the pigmy seahorses. It was obvious that all the DMs loved what they did and their enthusiasm was refreshing. The dive briefings were informative and straightforward. We ate our meals in the new dining room.

The food was very good and plentiful. Not gourmet, but reasonably healthy with a good variety. They had a meat dish, a fish dish and soup almost every dinner. They had an assortment of beers and wines if you were so inclined. Breakfasts were most always the same cereals, fresh fruit, eggs, and great coffee and juices. Our bungalow was # 20 on the far south side of the resort. It was referred to as a beach bungalow, but I saw no difference between the beach and the garden. The premium bungalows were facing west and had a fantastic view of the sunsets. We had a constant breeze on the south side and actually never turned on our A/C. The air temp was 90 most everyday with high humidity, and at night it might have gone down a few degrees. We slept on top of the king-size bed and never saw one mosquito — even though they had nets set up, we never once used it. We had plenty of room for storing our clothes and the housekeeping kept the room spotless. Each room has its own refrigerator and a fresh supply of water each day. Bungalows' lighting is very poor. Bring a head lamp so you can read at night.

Wakatobi, May 2007, Larry D. Gohl (ldg7@comcast.net), Antioch, IL.

Experience: 300 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 feet. Water: Choppy, strong currents. Joined Aquatic Encounters and Marc Bernardi. We stayed in Bali for a couple of nights and enjoyed the local culture. After a resort and dive briefing, we were showed to our cabanas. Mine was right off the beach, fully surrounded by lush plantings. Sand paths connected the cabanas, the long house, the restaurant, and the dive shop. That was the last time I wore shoes until I left ten days later. The dive operation was so well organized that all we were responsible for was analyzing our nitrox tanks.

Our gear was kept in an assigned box, which was always where it was needed, whether it was on the boat or ready for shore diving. Your analyzed tanks were on the boat, assembled with your gear, when you arrived to start diving. The diving was mainly from one of their stable dive boats. They had four similar boats used to get to the many dive sites surrounding the resort. The sites varied from 10 minutes away to 50 minutes. The boats held about 10-12 divers plus three dive guides, three crew members, and the captain. We had the same guide for our entire stay, which was nice, because he knew what we were looking for and was able to tailor the dives to satisfy all of us. There were four divers in our group. The guide's job was to find us critters and such. I was shooting macro, so the dive guide made sure that there was plenty to see. There was quite a current at times and the guide would let me hold on to him while taking a picture. The reefs were so alive and vibrant that finding a dead spot to hold on to while composing was all but impossible at most sites. We took photos of pygmy seahorses that were so small, I wasn't sure I got them until I downloaded onto the computer in the evening. We saw frogfish, leaffish, lionfish, nudibranchs of various shapes and colors, ghost pipefish, anemone shrimp, Nemo anemone fish, croc fish, mushroom coral pipefish, puff coral shrimp, and more. The guides were protective of the reefs. The resort is approximately ten years old, but their efforts to protect the reefs are apparently working. There was always a crew member ready to assist us back onto the boat at the end of the dive. They carefully took our cameras and put them in the rinse tank while another was helping us with our fins and getting back up the ladder. After helping us get out of our gear,

they had a dry towel for us while they were changing over the tanks for the next dive. There was always some sort of treat available for between dives, as well as water and tea. The owner has worked out an arrangement with the locals where he furnishes electricity and hires them to work at the resort, in exchange for their help in protecting the reefs from destructive fishing habits. We were taken on a tour of the local village, where the people were genuinely happy to see us. I would say that the food was good and plentiful. Everything was neat, clean, and orderly. The cabanas were cleaned daily and the sheets were changed three times during our stay. There seemed to be three employees to every guest. When we were getting on the plane to return to Bali, we found the owner of the resort standing at the bottom of the stairway shaking our hands and thanking us for coming to Wakatobi. We spent a couple more nights in Bali before returning home. We went on a tour of some local temples and a volcano with a tour guide. Bali is 95% Hindu and the people treated us as though they were happy to see us — something you don't always see.

Wakatobi Dive Resort, September 2007, Bob and Pat Thompson, Hatfield, PA. Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 75 Feet. Water: 76 to 78 F, choppy, currents. This was our first "big" dive trip outside the Caribbean and we loved it. The corals were spectacular. The dive boats are 65 feet (extremely spacious) and at most take 12 divers. The dive crew was extremely competent, setting up all equipment, and serving hot drinks, freshly baked cookies, and dry towels after each dive. By the second day, they knew what we liked to drink and brought it to us without even asking. Divemaster Irwin

was excellent and found pygmy seahorses, robust ghost pipefish, crocodile fish, leaf fish, frogfish, and many others that we never would have seen without him. One day, there was a school of baby pufferfish right under the dive boat. Also saw schools of bumphead parrotfish. The water was colder than we expected and we were glad that we had packed some extra neoprene, including a full hood. There is absolutely nothing to do after the 7:00 P.M. dinner hour, so if you crave night-life, this is not the place for you. Better lighting in the cabins to be able to curl up with a book would have been appreciated. But with the superb diving, who needs night-life! Night diving was available, and the 5:00 P.M. happy hour at the end of the pier offered beautiful sunsets. Don't miss the tour of the local village of Lamanggau, where many of the boat crew and resort personnel live. It makes you appreciate what you have. We were encouraged to bring school supplies, which we did, but would also bring small tools, such as screwdrivers and wrenches (metric) for the villagers if we ever went again. One fisherman was scraping the scales from a fish with a shell and we wished we had a knife we could have left with him. We took the 19-hour non-stop Singapore Airlines flight from Newark to Singapore, and then a 2-hour flight to Bali. The American airlines should take lessons in customer and food service from this airline; the treatment was royal. Spend a couple days in Bali; it's a beautiful island, and you will have room for souvenirs after you leave your school supplies in Wakatobi. UW Photography Comments: Large camera area on boats. Crew treated cameras with respect and knew which one belonged to which diver by the second day. Camera room dockside with 110 and 220 power

strips. Could leave cameras and equipment in the room overnight without fear of theft.

Wakatobi Dive Resort, September 2007, Bob and Doris Schaffer (seamom@earthlink.net), Fallbrook, CA. Experience: Over 1000 dives.

Vis: 20 to 60 Feet. Water: 77 to 79 F, calm, currents. 3 boat dives a day, one boat night dive during the week and unlimited shore diving (including night dives) on the house reef that runs the length of the resort. Pretty efficient dive operation; 12 divers to a comfortable long boat with one divemaster/guide for 6. Dive sites range from 5 minutes to 50 minutes away from the resort. Magnificent, healthy hard and soft corals, sea fans and small, unusual creatures on walls, reefs and slopes. We saw blue ribbon eels, turtles, banded sea snakes, ghost pipe fish, seahorses, frog fish, leaf fish, Mandarin fish, cuttle fish and a variety of nudibranchs plus much more. Not much in the way of large pelagics but did see a few spotted eagle rays and some barracuda. Mostly drift diving with some mild and some strong currents. A knowledgeable, helpful dive staff provides comfortable and safe diving in a healthy marine environment. The accommodations are beautiful, comfortable and first-rate and a spa is available for massages and other relaxing treatments. Three buffet meals a day offer a large variety of both Western and Asian food and, while it is not gourmet, it is tasty and satisfying and the staff makes every effort to accommodate special requests. We prefer live-aboard diving, but for a land-based operation, this one is the best. UW Photography Comments: A dedicated room with reasonably good accessibility, plenty of drying towels and adequate electrical sockets for both 110 and 220.