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# Looking over the Edge

## *Backpacker diving in Lombok, Indonesia*

*Inspired by Bali's success in attracting tourists, the Indonesian government and the travel industry are beginning to promote other areas of the country in hopes of spreading tourism dollars around. Two such areas that are being targeted for diving are northern Sulawesi, around Manado (which has been covered in our past issues), and Lombok, the island next door to Bali. To stay ahead of the curve and let you know before you spend your dive dollars, our In Depth/Undercurrent reviewer checks out the diving in Lombok.*

Dear Fellow Diver,

My first night in Lombok found me in a hut with no electricity (meaning no fan) in sweltering heat with an outdoor "bathroom" consisting of a head-high concrete wall, a cistern with brackish water, a bucket, and a

hole in the floor. The mosquito net covering the bed had more holes in it than the sky has stars. All night long, a gecko somewhere in the thatched roof auditioned for the title of World's Loudest Lizard.

### Reservations of a Sort

Although Lombok is within sight of tourist-laden Bali, most of its current visitors are "travelers," a term now used to describe youngsters backpacking on the cheap across Asia. I knew the accommodations would be basic, but it was the diving I wanted to experience because larger hotels are on the way as is the hype that goes along with the advertising.

I had selected Blue Marlin Dive Centre as probably the most reputable of the several shops

operating in the Gilis, off the northwest coast of Lombok ("Gili" means "Island" in Indonesian, so only foreigners call them the "Gili Islands." Just say "Gilis" and you'll be cool). Blue Marlin is located on Gili Trawangan, where most of the action is, if you can call it that. About 300 people live permanently on Trawangan, and in peak season about as many transients pass through.

I had booked in advance with Blue Marlin to secure one of their newly built bungalows just behind the dive centre for \$30 a night. I was assured it was "very nice" and had inside toilets. When I arrived, however, I was told they had overbooked. After much searching, an alternative in town was located, for \$4 a night — complete with gecko.

### The Operation

Blue Marlin is run by Simon Liddiard, a gregarious, muscular young Englishman. As the owner-operator, Simon emphasizes safety, but you have to put this in the proper context; in Indonesia, after all, you're in the middle of nowhere, not on Grand Cayman. He does have new Bauer compressors humming away (unusual in these parts), an extensive stock of rental gear, and lots of oxygen available (he ought to — he mixes his own EAN).

On the downside, he uses traditional Indonesian-style outrigger fishing boats with a six-foot beam, meaning you put 15 divers in them and you don't have room to turn around. The boats have one outboard motor, no radio, no oxygen aboard, and are only partly covered against the tropical sun.

Three dives are offered each day, at 9, 11, and 2, for \$17.50 per dive. Night dives are not regularly scheduled but can be arranged

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### **DEMA: BOBS, Yes; No Bubbles, No**

year at Orlando? Not a lot. Atomic Aquatics, a company started by two former Scubapro designers, introduced its titanium regulator. Its ultralight second stage, some innovative design features, and a claim that annual overhauls are no longer necessary make this a reg I'd like to test dive. Suunto was showing its watch-sized Spyder — a full-function dive computer that doubles as a wrist watch. Bellaqua featured BOB, a kind of 12-volt-battery-powered underwater Moped that scoots you along the reef with your head high and dry inside a clear acrylic dome.

However, the biggest hype of the show was rebreathers. Are we ready for a unit that allows us to rebreathe the same air instead of blowing bubbles? Are manufacturers really producing them? Ready or not, many manufacturers were touting no-bubble technology, so we asked tech-diving guru Michael Menduno to sort it all out for us in next month's issue.

Footnote: Surf Expo, running concurrently next door to DEMA, made the dive industry look conservative — an adjective that had not crossed my mind before. The late Marjorie Banks, who led the campaign "No Bimbos in Advertising," would have been appalled. J. Q.

Once again resorts, live-boards, travel wholesalers, and equipment manufacturers presented their wares to scuba retailers at the annual Diving Equipment Marketing Association (DEMA) show. What was new this

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upon request. I suspect this is because the backpacker crowd is more interested in partying in the evening than getting wet.

But the backpackers must have some interest in diving, because the shop has five instructors working to certify around 100 divers a month. Simon is also an International Association of Nitrox and Technical Divers instructor and is qualified to teach all levels of Nitrox, as well as Deep Air and Trimix. I sucked down a few tanks of EAN while we were there. None of the dive sites are deeper than 130 feet anyway, so it's a perfect spot for Nitrox if you're certified for it (and he does check cards).

Though the dive boats are slow, most of the sites are no more than 15 minutes away, close together on the windward side of Gili Trawangan and Gili Meno. But you don't even have to go that far; get them to drop you off upcurrent on the main beach, then drift back. The reef immediately offshore was as good as any I visited.

## Snakes and Ribbons

I did see some big stuff. I briefly glimpsed a few mantas on my first dive. Relatively low viz, 35–60 feet, meant that any encounters were fleeting (the summer season, April–October, is said to yield 100-foot-plus visibility). I did see green sea turtles on almost every dive; they were relaxed and approachable. A 2-foot octopus out in broad daylight was a treat, as were the big cuttlefish and 5-foot whitetip reef sharks resting on the bottom. Big red-eyed stonefish, a pair of blue-ribbon eels, 3-foot bumphead parrotfish, blue-spotted stingrays, and a lovely juvenile pinnatus batfish were a few of the highlights. I also got to watch a 3-foot banded sea snake poke its nose into the reef looking for snacks.

In general, the reefs were in good shape, with lush stands of mixed hard corals interspersed with various species of soft corals and gorgonians, providing shelter for a rich selection of reef fish as well as a host of invertebrates: brilliant mantis shrimp and several species of nudibranchs and flatworms. Barrel sponges were almost as large as any I've seen at Little Cayman. There were fairly strong currents on most dives, so bring a safety sausage and air horns.

Some reef sections had clearly been fish-bombed (dynamite fishing, an epidemic problem in Indonesia), but Simon says it happens only rarely around the Gilis. He has also been trying to get the local government to put in moorings, but "they don't really get it." Neither does the boat crew; on every dive, they threw the anchor overboard without regard to the consequences.

## Alternate Digs

My accommodations did improve. After that first sleepless night, I found an upgrade: Bintan Trawangan, a collection of five bungalows with tile roofs, woven

bamboo walls, and a pleasant porch with chairs. The bathroom was still outside in the back, surrounded by a high block wall, but at least it had a real toilet (flushed by pouring a bucket of water into it). The electricity was on only at night (240 V, round-pin plugs), though the bulbs were so dim we couldn't read by them.

At \$6 a night, I was paying 50 percent (gasp!) more than the night before, but the improvement was noticeable. There was a wonderful breeze at night, and the pounding waves lulled me to sleep — briefly, until the geckos kicked in. Then, at 4 a.m., the roosters started up. Oh, well. . . .

## Worth the Effort?

The advertising is beginning and the luxury hotels are under construction, but you can ignore the hype about world-class diving. It's a cheap place to travel for now. The diving infrastructure is there, complete with Nitrox, and I enjoyed the diving, but you can mark it off your list as a destination you would journey for days to dive on, like North Sulawesi.

C. B.

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Blue Marlin Dive Centre, Gili Trawangan, Lombok N.T.B., Indonesia (phone 011-62-364-32424, fax 011-62-364-93043). To get there, after landing at the airport in Mataram, rent a taxi for about \$10 (current exchange rate about 2,360 Rupiah per U.S. dollar) for a pleasant, 30-minute ride to Bangsal on the northwest coast. There you can pay Rp 1,600 for a packed ferry, or more grandly, charter a boat at Rp 21,000 for the 40-minute crossing to Gili Trawangan. . . . In Indonesia, bargaining is the custom. They make an offer, you counter at one-third the price and go from there. The prices I'm quoting are post-bargaining. . . . I later discovered another group of bungalows called Sunset, which looked pleasant. You can't make a reservation at any of these places — no phones — so just show up and hope. The island is worth exploring, though it has nothing to compare with the stunning architecture and culture of Bali. Although I was there in the rainy season, November–March, I saw almost no rain. Afternoon winds would kick up the ocean a bit, so the best diving was in the morning. Air temperatures ranged from 75 to 85°F, cooler in the Lombok highlands. The water temperature was 79–81°F, reported up to 84°F in the peak season, July and August.

## Ditty Bag