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Ben Davison's **In Depth**

The Personal Diving Report . . . for Traveling Divers

***Serenade*, in Sulawesi, Indonesia**

Coral, currents, and a fast ride to the depths

Indonesia is rapidly becoming the "hot spot" for diving — look for several new live-aboards and resorts to start up here soon. Operated by the owners of the Murex Dive Resort, of whom I've heard only good reports, the Serenade has a dependable base to work from, but what about the vessel and the diving? Our reviewer gives us a look.

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Dear Fellow Diver:

It's unfortunate that exciting diving and powerful currents so often are linked -- that life is lush and colorful beneath the surface for the same reason that the diving is uncomfortable or hazardous. Perhaps that's why the Caribbean has so few high-voltage sites, and the Pacific so many -- and why I'm always on the lookout for bargain dive trips on the other side of the world.

I found one in the brochure suggesting that I "dive into adventure on the *Serenade*, a 75-foot vessel specially built for live-aboard diving." Destination Indonesia, next door to many marvelous diving locations: New Guinea, the Philippines, the Solomons. And look at the price: \$2,900, including airfare, for seven days on the boat, a couple of day-boat dives out of Manado, and two days touring Bali! I couldn't do Belize's *Wave Dancer* for much less than that.

A Trans-Pacific Beetle Ride

In deciding whether a trip is a bargain, one must assign a price to coach-class misery. Garuda airlines from L.A. made a four-hour stop in Hawaii and a six-hour stop eight hours later on Biak, then flew me to Ujung Pandang for a 24-hour layover in a comfortable hotel. I needed Garuda's free drinks to survive the seats, packed in tighter than in a VW bug, with backs reclining only two inches. Finally, a two-hour flight brought me to Manado, in North Sulawesi, and the Murex resort, home to the *Serenade*.

Built in the local Minahassen style, the Murex is a small, intimate resort with comfortable cottages set in lush gardens alongside a bay. Indonesian food is copious and varied. A variety of interesting land tours were available, but I relaxed

... I dared not let go of the bottom with my non-camera hand. Eventually Eddie appeared and encouraged me to crawl with him from rock to rock in the prescribed direction.

by the beach to melt my stress away. The Murex is the personal love of Dr. and Mrs. Hanny Batuna, who have nicely maintained the quality of the natural environment. Dr. Batuna, who has an advanced degree in tropical medicine from Tulane, is a certified PADI instructor and would lead us on the trip aboard his boat.

Cruising Among Smoking Islands

The *Serenade*, a year or so old, is operated by a crew of eight. Each of her six cabins has a shower; four have private toilets, three are air conditioned. The forward sun deck and the upper poop deck are fine for camera work and suiting up; between dives I sunned and read there, munching on cookies and cakes and sipping tea. The small area for donning aluminum 80s required a good deal of fancy footwork to avoid snarls and collisions among the 11 passengers, most toting cameras. While lacking in the fine appointments of craft such as the new *Aggressors*, the *Serenade* is solidly built and has all the essentials.

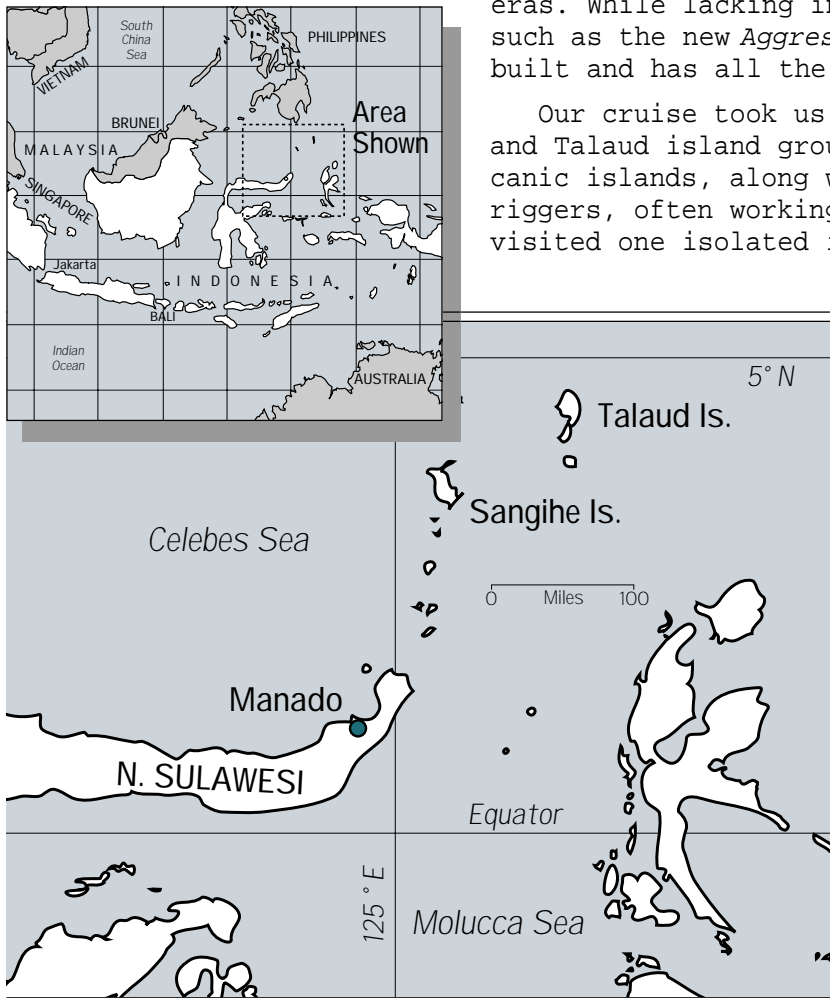
Our cruise took us north of Manado to the Sangihe and Talaud island groups. We passed three smoking volcanic islands, along whose shores men fished from outriggers, often working out of floating houses. We visited one isolated island where the major industry is building boats by hand. The natives have had few, if any, European visitors -- which may account for the warmth and exuberant laughter with which they vied to pose for pictures.

Wanted: Experienced Guides

Almost all dives involved erratic conditions, which may contribute to the vigor and variety of sea life but often detract from diving pleasure. An expert dive operation could mitigate these difficulties, but the *Serenade* crew was inexperienced. Divemaster Eddie's decisions about where and how to make our dives seemed eccentric and impulsive. Sometimes we entered directly off the stern of the boat and sometimes from the two inflatables, with Eddie frequently changing his mind

and our last-minute preparations. His briefings, when they occurred, were sketchy and sometimes inaccurate. He often tossed diving decisions back to us, despite our unfamiliarity with the waters.

I have no problem diving alone or with my buddy, but experienced leadership is called for in these more perilous waters.



Eastern Indonesia

While Dr. Batuna led some of us attimes, Eddie, the sole dive-master, was usually the only guide, and his judgment was shaky.

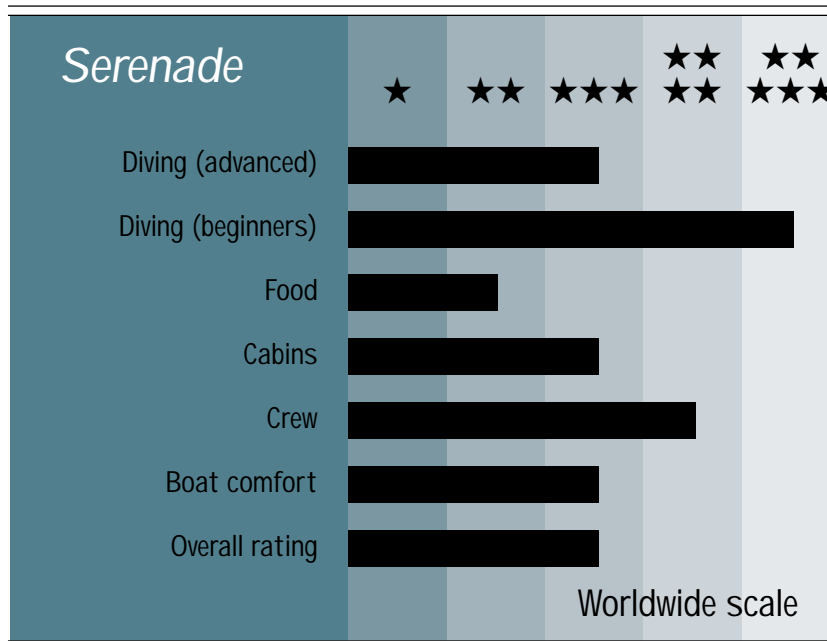
On our first dive off a small island,Eddie told us the current was flowing to our right. But whenwe hit the water, it was flowing so powerfully in the oppositedirection that most divers were quickly swept away from the bottom. My buddy disappeared; I dropped down and hung onto rocks on the bottom. I could barely inch my way along, seeing only dimly through the fog in my mask because I dared not let go of the bottom with my non-camera hand. Eventually Eddie appeared and encouraged me to crawl with him from rock to rock in the prescribed direction.

Suddenly the current slacked off. I cleared my mask and was overwhelmed by the magnificence of the underwater scenery. There were masses of crinoids ranging from delicate yellow to deepest gold, colorful corals both hard and soft, rapid swarms of bannerfish. Anthias and pseudoanthias surrounded the adjacent corals, dramatically set off by the vivid black-lava background. I had discovered an underwater fairyland, but one only I could enjoy -- the other divers had been swept elsewhere.

The next dive was shallower and less spectacular, but more comfortable. I saw more gorgonians, crinoids, and tunicates, strangely shaped starfish, and enormous schools of snappers and wrasse, all somewhat obscured by plankton and particulates. A blue-spotted ray cruised along the sand, quickly slipping under a coral formation at the sight of me.

Sightseeing: Swept Away Hopelessly

Most days we did two dives, plus a night dive for those who wished. On my first night dive, I went with Eddie. There was no current, and he showed me a fascinating variety of creatures: decorator crabs, manta shrimp, nudibranchs, a sleepy puffer, somnambulant fish, intricate basket stars, slipper lobsters. On the second dive -- my last -- he decided to take us to a "better" spot along the wall than where we had dived earlier. But he led us on a marathon race along the top of the wall, using most of our air and energy, only to encounter such a strong current when we tried to go down that we were swept hopelessly away and had to be randomly gathered up by the dinghy, which was already full of divers for the next shift.



My own experience in diving Indonesia is that water conditions are unpredictable. I could return to a dive site that 30 minutes earlier had been dead calm with 150 vis, and there would be a ripping current with visibility of 30 feet. Schools of fish that had crowded the reef earlier would also be gone. I wouldn't want to be a divemaster calling the shots here.

J. Q.

Last March, after a trip on the *Cehili*, another In Depth reviewer visited Sulawesi to check out Murex resort. She missed going out on the *Serenade*, but just as well, as it broke down four days into its trip. As for Murex, she reported that the season was wrong. Boat rides to the nearby sites were an hour long — on a sunny day, fine, but it was mostly hard, driving rain. She still found the resort and its hosts charming and wants to return — during the dry season. The rain falls mostly December–March.

Visibility, like the currents, varied enormously. Occasionally it magically cleared, as it had on my first dive, to 80 feet or even more. But more often it was so obscured by plankton and assorted detritus (stimulated by violent currents) that it was reduced to as little as 20 feet. I found my Lycra diveskins quite adequate for the 78–82 water.

What most impressed me was the consistent richness of the sea life. I saw beautiful walls (though currents kept me from composing satisfying photos) and several sites boasted gigantic barrel sponges of wildly imaginative shapes and contours. Although I came across Spanish dancers and strange nudibranchs, the only really large pelagics I saw were Napoleon wrasses, those inflated shapes that drift just out of reach with a thoughtfully benign expression. I spotted an occasional shark in the distance, and once I found several drowsing under slabs of table coral, but none were big. My hopes of seeing mantas and whale sharks were never realized.

A Fast Ride Into the Deep

The most memorable underwater event occurred halfway through the voyage. We were to follow Dr. Batuna and a couple of other divers down to an alleged reef at 90 feet. I was slow to clear my ears, so I lost sight of them in the blue water somewhere around 80 feet. Suddenly, the current took us. By now, I was used to its power and accustomed to letting it take me

wherever it would, then surfacing to await the dinghy if there was nothing to see.

However, unbeknownst to me and my partner, this current pulled us directly downward. Neither my ears (fully accommodated by now) nor any visual clues revealed the precipitous drop I was experiencing. A minute or so later, my buddy yanked my fin and I checked my computer.

We were 200 feet down! Fortunately, we each had full tanks of air (it had been that fast), so we could come up slowly and carefully -- amazing how focused you get in that situation -- and make safety stops

at 40 and 20 feet. I had one minute of no-decompression time left at depth: maximum depth 218 feet!

Food For a Small Planet

With such exercises, we needed sustenance, which was about all you could call the meals. That a dozen meals at a time could be prepared in the tiny galley seemed miraculous. The dining area, too, is small, but pleasant, with a six-person table on each side of the aisle. Breakfast was fruit, toast usually

Ditty Bag

Murex, three days on Bali, taxes and service charges, transfers, and roundtrip air from Los Angeles for \$2,006. Bali can be bypassed by flying Singapore Air directly into Manado through Singapore, but the cost is about the same. Maluku Adventures, 800-566-2585, can book scheduled departures on the *Serenade* on May 17–21, May 22–29, and July 31–Aug. 6. The price is \$165/day. There are also plenty of dates available for charter.

Staying land based at Murex runs about \$100/day/diver including lodging, meals, and two dives/day. Some areas of Bali, such as the beach resorts around Denpasar, are beautiful but overrun with tourists and vendors; however, trips into Bali's interior still reveal a friendly and open population — even their gods and mythology and dramatic ceremonials are permeated with good humor and a happy sense of the absurd.

My trip was offered through Great Destinations (800-741-2178; 916-361-1467; FAX 916-361-7103). . . . One of their packages includes seven days on the *Serenade*, three days at

eggs, always cheese; lunch and dinner, a variety of Indonesian mixtures of fish, pork, or mutton in soup, or casserole combinations with known and unknown vegetables. Rice in large quantities accompanied all meals.

Bottom Line

I have mixed feelings about the *Serenade*, mainly because of the inadequate dive leadership and decision making. Perhaps that will be remedied; Dr. Batuna was at the January DEMA show, where he was earnestly attempting to learn from the experts what improvements would benefit his operation.

As for the lovely Murex, I wish I had more time to spend there. On our first-day, warmup shore dive, I photographed at leisure a pugnacious mantis shrimp and several cuttlefish. Both lionfish and a vivid yellow version of a local tunicate turned out to be common local phenomena. On our last day we transferred to a day boat out of the Murex for a couple of dives around the island of Bunaken, a national park. I saw giant clams and schools of barracuda and walls as beautiful as anything we had seen in our sojourn through the islands. For many people, ending their journey here rather than boarding the *Serenade* will be a better choice.

Y.A.

There are two other dive centres in Manado: Nusantara, which is much larger than the family-style Murex, and nearby Barracuda, which has individual cottages. For more information, call Maluku Adventures, 800-566-2585. Maluku also books the *Pendito*, another Indonesian live-aboard that has been catering mainly to the European market. The large, deluxe boat in the area, is the *Cehili*. Call Island Dreams, 800-346-6116, or Tropical Adventures, 800-247-3483, for information.

J. Q.

Beating Your Money There

Readers and resort owners complain; Sea Safaris responds

Imagine your worst travel nightmare.

It couldn't be much worse than what happened to Steve and Beth Green of Colton, California, who showed up last July in the Solomon Islands carrying two prepaid vouchers for the *Bilikiki* live-aboard. They had booked the trip through Sea Safaris, a Manhattan Beach, California, travel agency, to whom they had prepaid \$5,920.

Rick Belmare, owner of the *Bilikiki*, refused to let them board. While he knew they were arriving, he told them that Sea Safaris had not responded to his many

requests for payment. The Greens, he said, could board only if they paid him.

Shocked, the Greens faxed Sea Safaris but received no response. Rather than forgoing their trip, they provided Belmare with credit-card imprints, hoping Sea Safaris' money would arrive before they completed their two-week cruise. It didn't.

Not until the Greens returned home were they able to talk to someone at Sea Safaris, but their claim wasn't satisfied. Finally, after filing a lawsuit and serving Sea Safaris, they got paid — but only in part, they said. On March 11,

Beth Green said Sea Safaris still owed her more than \$1,500.

Deb and Al Kulhawik (Hamden, Connecticut) had a similar experience the week before. They had dealt with Sea Safaris owners Bob and Nancy Ackerman French for years and, Deb told me, considered them friends. Nonetheless, the payment from Sea Safaris didn't arrive at the *Bilikiki* office until they were at sea. Deb said Sea Safaris still owed them for vouchers that were unacceptable to the local dive shop and hotel. "In January," she said, "I was told the money was in accounting." When I talked to her