
The Back of Beyond

Reports from two exotic dive destinations in Indonesia

For American divers, the last great unexplored area is Southeast Asia's six million square miles of islands and seas. Serious dive travelers have heard of Sipadan and the Andaman Islands and dreamed of Borneo and Bali. It's not the cost that keeps many away -- a couple of weeks, airfare included, is about the same as a pricey island like Cayman -- but the five to six days of round-trip travel time can make it prohibitive.

Nonetheless, thanks to extended vacations, a bank of frequent-flyer miles, and an adventurous spirit, more and more *In Depth* readers are looking for unexplored paradises. This time we review two land-based operations in Indonesia, where the critters appear extraterrestrial but the accommodations and people are friendly and comfortable.

Kungkungan Bay Resort, Sulawesi

Dear Fellow Diver,

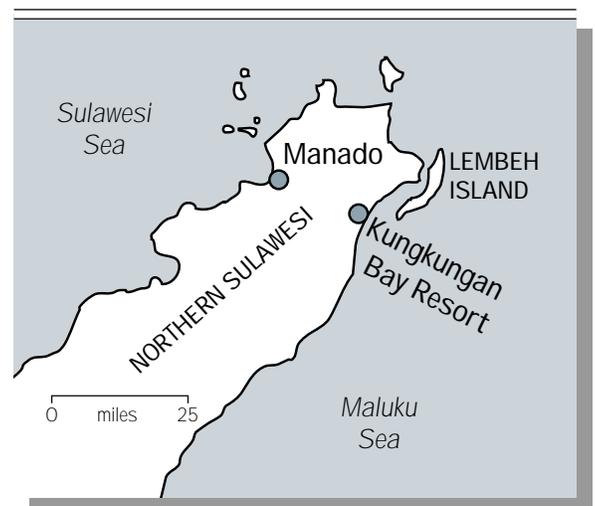
Before I travel halfway around the world to dive, I want firsthand information. So to answer my request, Larry Smith of Kungkungan Bay Resort in Indonesia faxed a teasing note -- "pregnant harlequin ghost pipefish, football-sized frogfish, and a pregnant pink seahorse." I packed my bags for Northern Sulawesi because Larry Smith, once divemaster at Little Cayman's Pirate's Point and expedition leader on the *Cehili*, is among the best in the business. Whatever critters were there, he would find them.

Now, I'm a smart and experienced traveler, but I failed to ask one question before my departure. When I arrived, Larry was out of the country. Dearly bummed, I thought I'd move on to Manado and the Bunaken Marine Preserve. But thanks to good treatment by American manager Mark Ecenbarger, son of the owner, I didn't give it a second thought.

Island Luxury Ashore

The two-year-old, American-owned resort stands on a former coconut plantation on Lembeh Strait, a narrow channel between Sulawesi and Lembeh Island. Two "traditional" houses are nearly completed; four cottages, each with two apartments, are a short walk up the coarse black sand beach. Constructed of coconut wood, each apartment has three rooms. Mine had a glass-enclosed sitting room with comfortable rattan sofas and chairs and a spacious bedroom with two queen-size beds, drying

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***Northern
Sulawesi***

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rack, and night stands. A ceiling fan adequately cooled the rooms. The large bathroom has both tub and separate shower, so I could shower while my cameras soaked.

The two-tiered main building perches on stilts over water where a handmade reef was transplanted from other areas of the bay. A short walk away is the Diving Centre, where dive boats pull up on the beach; though the Indonesian government has yet to grant a permit to complete the pier, three-foot sea fans have grown on the pilings.

Diving on Wrecks and off Beaches

Upon arrival, I assembled my gear as the staff watched. It was the last time I had to touch it. Boat dives are scheduled at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., but these times can be adjusted to suit divers' preferences. Before each dive, Mark gave us the essentials and drew maps. The first dive would be the *Malawi*, an intact Japanese WWII freighter in 100 feet of water. Some divers wanted a tour, but I preferred to concentrate on photography, so we split into two groups on the covered, 20-foot-plus, outboard-powered craft. They operate a similar second boat, and a larger boat has just been launched.

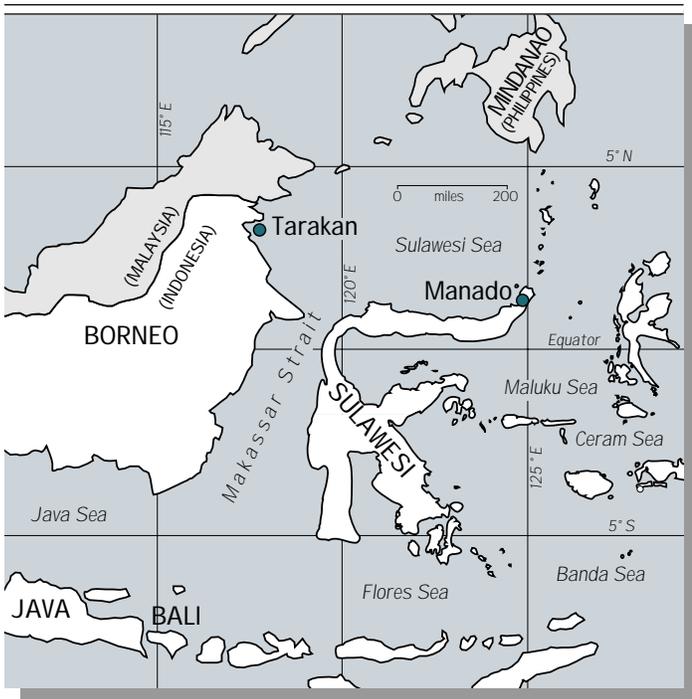
After a 15-minute ride, the boat boys snorkeled to find the buoy, which had been set at 30 feet so fishermen would not cut it.

Backrolling off the boat, I descended to the top of the wreck at 60 feet. A T-shaped structure swarmed with lionfish in clouds of small sweepers. I could touch a dozen without moving. Corals and sponges covered the huge propeller so thickly it was unrecognizable. On the forward deck I found several nudibranchs and other small critters.

We left the wreck and headed back for a beach dive at the resort, where diving was so good I often skipped meals. Swimming from the beach over anemones and schools of catfish, I found a cleaning station 75 feet out where sweetlips, trumpets, parrots, and wrasse tilted nose up as small blennies picked away dead flesh and parasites. I found a weird, red-orange mantis shrimp perched in its nest, rotating its eyes. Varieties of anemones -- including a stunning fluorescent-pink variety -- and their symbiotic fish were common

around the staghorn and lettuce corals, as were crinoids and pipefish. I often saw schools of large squid, and every morning I had a date with a big cuttlefish.

An occasional current accounts for the red, orange and yellow sea fans attached to the legs of the pier and the sea pens (where small crabs live) in the sand. At night I found an 8-inch nudibranch, sand dollars, and cowries among the corals.



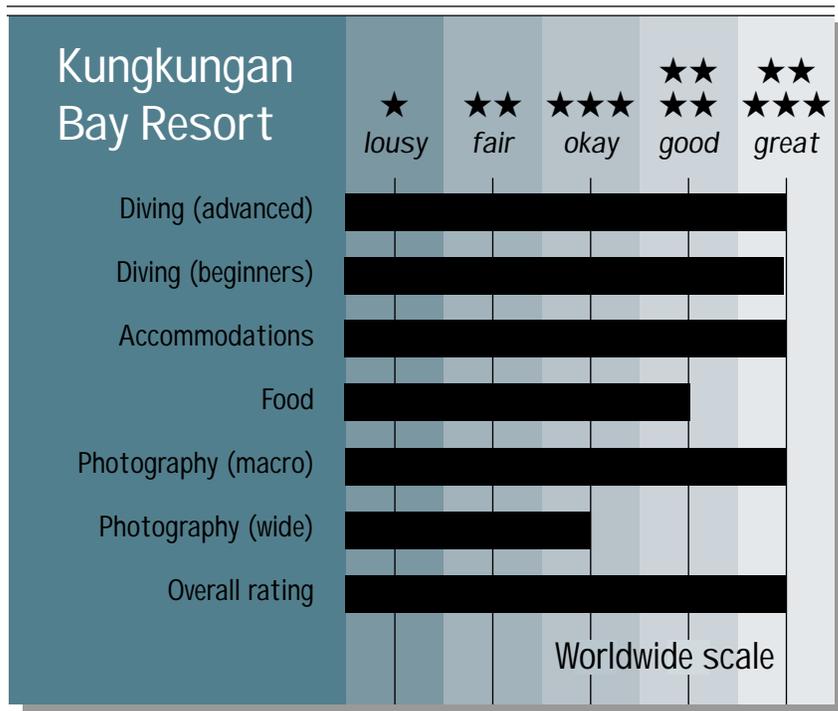
Eastern Indonesia

Even the blue-ringed octopus, reputedly the most poisonous marine critter around, has been spotted here.

Apres-Dive Eats and Treats

When not diving, I enjoyed the good food: vichyssoise, Thai ginger chicken soup, mie goreng (Indonesian fried noodles), quesadillas, chicken enchiladas, steak, pasta pesto, chef salad, various chicken dishes served with rice and vegetables, sandwiches, and even churros, a Mexican fried pastry. Because the food was prepared with local ingredients, each dish had an uncommon spin, but all were good. A second menu offered traditional Indonesian food such as curried chicken, sweet-and-sour prawns, coconut soup, and chicken Minehasan style -- all with good, strong coffee. The resort also accommodates special dietary needs.

Mr. Mark, as staff call him, interviewed, trained, and taught English to local residents for a year before opening the resort. Once, I ordered an omelet but got a sandwich with the same ingredients. On the whole, though, they do a fine job.



Walls and Walls of Critters

Boat dives depart every evening at 6 p.m. At Serena Kecil, on a coral-studded slope, eyes everywhere reflected my light. It was a problem to find decorator crab eyes and get a face shot -- they had covered themselves in orange sponges, blue tunicates, and broken coral. Hermit crabs adorned with anemones also scampered about. Mark showed me a squat, pink-and-purple lobster with long, white hair. We found a large cuttlefish, Saron shrimp (nose like a bottlebrush with rosettes on the sides), and nudibranchs between colorful corals and sponges.

On the other side of Serena Kecil I descended to 80 feet, where I photographed a gold frogfish (with Paul Newman's eyes), a variety of glittering cuttlefish, gobies on the wire corals, and a variety of nudibranchs and anemones. Although I was initially disgusted with the weedy muck, I changed my opinion quickly about this macro paradise.

At Nudi Retreat I cruised along walls covered with soft corals, photographed a sea snake, found schools of batfish in volcanic crannies, chased a school of shrimpfish, and watched pretty little nudibranchs among the tunicates. I found a

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cockatoo waspfish, a small, brown scorpionfish that imitates a leaf swaying in the surge (even when there's no surge).

How Was Your Trip?

Hello, my friends. How about telling us about your latest dive trips?

Come December, you'll be receiving the 1997 edition of the *Travelin' Divers' Chapbook*, and I want to be sure we include your comments. So if you've taken a trip since August 1995, please describe it on

the enclosed questionnaire. Feel free to write up anything you want separately, and if you want to get windy, and send us the diskette, you'll become a charter member of my personal hall of fame.

We're looking for the *Chapbook* to get bigger and better every year, so please join your fellow subscribers — who number 9,000, up 5,000 from a year ago — and tell us about the good, the bad, and the ugly.

B. D.

even a snorkeler's teeth on a long breath-hold dive. They hopped onto my strobe and lens and the sweepers swam between my face and camera.

Sometimes the water would be crystal clear, but more often visibility would be 40-50 feet, with particulates like snow. I was comfortable in a Polartec suit for my five dives per day, but other divers wore lightweight neoprene.

Mermaids' Manicure, with the Magic Rock, was a fine site. I could hardly see the rock, about the size of the Unabomber's cabin, for the schools of golden sweepers and copper sweepers that covered it. Cleaner shrimp live all over the rock; they clean

The only down side: I didn't see many pelagics, but due to weather we were unable to dive the far north sites toward the open sea.

Other Considerations

KBR can arrange day trips to dive Bunaken, overnight trips to the forest preserves, and all-day dive picnics. Up the road, a hospital for injured animals sports well-cared-for monkeys, a cobra, a crocodile, parrots, rusa, tree kangaroos, a ringed cat, a hornbill, and others.

Ditty Bag

Seven-day packages — \$1,156 double, \$1,565 single — include meals, room, 14 boat dives, unlimited beach dives, transfers, tax, and service charge. Additional day boat dives were \$40, night dives \$45. . . . I booked through

Cindy at Dive Discovery in San Rafael, California (she's been there) at 800-886-7321 or 415-256-8890, fax 415-258-9115; she can arrange airfare for about \$1,200 from the West Coast via Bali and Jakarta; or use your frequent-flier miles to get to Singapore, and it's \$259 round trip to Manado; the resort picks you up for the hour-plus drive. . . . Resort home office is 510-825-1921 or fax 510-825-0105; they can't handle airfare. Reach Larry at 62-438-30300 (fax 62-438-31400) in Indonesia. . . . although it was the rainy season (November-March), it rained only one afternoon — but it rained every day in Manado. . . . No visas required for Americans staying less than 60 days. . . . Electricity is 220/240-volt, 50 cycles. To check out camera gear, a roll of print film can be developed in town. . . . BYOC (bring your own chocolate).

. . . Cleaner shrimp live all over the rock; they clean fingernails, even a snorkeler's teeth, on a long breath-hold dive.

Alas, all is not paradise. Islands of trash, plastic, paper, and wood debris have been washed into the sea by heavy rains. Often the entry or exit from a dive involved swimming through trash, and the current often plastered plastic and rice bags against fragile corals. Mark wants to train local students to dive, not only to learn about the world underwater, but to teach the people what they must do to protect the environment.

Still, a great trip. I remain disappointed that Larry was not at Kungkungan, and although I can't imagine what else he could have found me, I'm sure it would have been something.

D. D.