

the dive sites are fabulous — again, large coral formations, with swim-throughs and friendly fish. When one wants to take a break from diving, one can visit the camel market at Shalatin, the last town before the Sudanese border. This is another two-hour drive south, and trucks from Sudan bring thousands of camels for sale and pick up household goods to bring back to Sudan. Another possibility is a trip into the desert with Salah, who has a house close to the hotel. Salah is a retired colonel of the Egyptian Border Guards, who was stationed in this area for seven years. He will take you into the wadis and show you ruins of Roman forts that guarded the way from Assuan to the coast. Both are trips that are well-worth-while! We have dived the Red Sea for almost 20 years and had just about given up, because in Hurghada and Sharm it is hard to get into the water because of all the boats around you. But this area is the Red Sea as it used to be! We advise you to go there soon, before the area will be also overbuilt and five diveboats will be at the same buoy. (<http://lahamibay.com/>)

## INDONESIA

While Bali's culture is fantastic (especially if you get away from the coast), the diving's not as spectacular as in other parts of Indonesia. ... On Bali's east coast the Liberty wreck at Tulamben is a favorite among fish specialists, who claim to find a new species on every visit. On the north end there's a good chance of diving with mola molas. ... While they're

certainly harder to get to than Bali, the Banda Islands have some of the best coral and fish life in the world. ... Although it offers few big fish, Wakatobi, a operation in remote southern Sulawesi, offers fantastic color, amazing biodiversity, and one of the best beach dives in the world. ... If bizarre and rare creatures are a lure, Ambon has a dive that surpasses even PNG's famous muck dives, as does Kungkungan Bay in northern Sulawesi. ... If you're into big turtles (and lots of them), Borneo Diver's operation on Sangalaki and nearby Derawan Resort finds them. ... Live-aboards plying the water to Komodo, the home of the dragons, find world class diving. ... The volatile political scene has put a cloud over diving Indonesia, so check with the State Department before travel and inquire about specific destinations rather than asking about the country as a whole. Before you leave, get a copy of Kal Muller's "Underwater Indonesia."

## Bunaken

**Thalassa Diving, Santika Resort, July 2003, Mel McCombie and Harris Friedberg, New Haven, CT.** Number of dives: about 1400 each. The resort is fine. We had an oceanfront cottage with a stunning view of a volcanic island; the room was a little dark for reading but comfortable. The food at the resort is iffy (local dishes are best), but tolerable for a few days. Run by expat Dutch Simone Gerritson, Thalassa

Diving is professional, personal, and full service. They not only tote and set up your gear, they wash it at the end of the day — even wetsuits! We dove three times a day, and had the choice of three day dives (2 in the morning, with a simple lunch on Bunaken Island), 1 in the afternoon) or 2 day dives (late morning, lunch, and afternoon) followed by a night dive. We did both, and would be hard pressed to say which we liked more. The dives around Bunaken are spectacular. The area is a new marine park, with required dive tags along the model of Bonaire, and the park is making strides toward environmental excellence. There are still bits of garbage around, but the dive operators are careful to explain how hard the peoples of the area are working to make Bunaken a true marine park. The dives around Bunaken tend to be sheer walls covered with corals, hard and soft, lots of current, and critters and fish everywhere. I noted currents from 0-60, and depending on them, your dives could be scenery and big stuff (sharks, turtles) or sniffing around the corals looking for the rare and tiny. Our dive guide, Djamel, was superb, both knowledgeable about marine life, safety minded, and interested in the environment. As wonderful as the day dives were, the night dives were better. I tend to get wimpy at night, loathe to don a wet wetsuit and forgo dinner until later — but night dives on Thalassa's house reef were so amazing I looked forward to them. We saw so much octopii, biocellatus lionfishes hunting, more crustaceans than I could name, basket stars (both sessile and predatory) and an overarching sense of the beauty of the

area. The water was a comfortable 82 degrees F, and depending on the currents, visibility ranged from quite good to quite low. However, the guides were always there for you, so even if you were hellbent on getting lost, you couldn't do it. The lunches on Bunaken Island were basic-overcooked fish and rice — but that owes more to the subsistent economy than the operations. ([www.thalassa.net/santika.html](http://www.thalassa.net/santika.html))

### Irian Jaya

**Irian Diving, August 2002, Tony Moats (Amoats6900@aol.com), Boulder, CO.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, choppy, surge, currents, no currents. My second trip with Irian Diving in the Raja Ampat Islands of Papua (formerly Irian Jaya), Indonesia. This is "frontier diving" in every sense of the word — almost no divers, remote, and full of adventure and new discoveries. No amenities except world-class diving. I spent two weeks diving the sites near Irian Diving's Kri camp — also sea kayaked and dived unknown sites in a remote island group to the north known as Wayag. Flew to Jakarta, then Sorong via Ujung Pandang (Makassar) on Pelita Air. Pelita is expensive (\$500 round trip from Jakarta to Sorong), but supposedly more reliable than Merpati. Then it's a two-hour boat ride to Camp Kri where the standard sites are located. From there, if you want to explore remote areas (e.g., Wayag), it's anywhere from five to six hours more by boat and involves camping. Owner Max Ammer came to the Raja Ampat

over 12 years ago searching for WW2 wrecks. He is a wealth of information about the location of land and sea wrecks, many never encountered by westerners. The head divemaster Otto has great eyes for macro life and for locating divers after surfacing in strong current and big swell. All staff are friendly and genuinely love diving. The diversity and health of the reefs are exceptional, even for Indonesia.

Incredible biodiversity — 283 species of reef fish counted on one dive (Cape Kri), which is located minutes from the dive camp! Rare encounters included Wobbegone and Epauvette sharks, dugongs, blue-ringed octopus, pygmy seahorses, full-size giant clams (4 feet), mating pygmy cuttlefish, and numerous nudibranches not to be found in any ID book. The tropical fish are abundant — many familiar species were much larger than I've seen anywhere. Larger predators included Spanish mackerel, dogtooth tuna, and hefty four-foot Queensland groupers. Some Napoleon wrasse, but impact of live fish trade market is being seen. Saw herds of humphead parrotfish often, as well as lots of green turtles (occasional hawksbill and loggerheads). When the currents right on certain dives (e.g., Sardine Reef), expect Palau Blue Corner experience without the sharks. There are some sharks — mostly whitetips and blacktips (many Wobbegones if you know where to look) and the occasional reef shark. The corals, both hard and soft, are exceptional with no evidence of bleaching. I saw table corals often feet in diameter. It is estimated that over half of the world's species of hard

corals can be found in this region. Soft corals often growing 5 feet from the surface. Some researchers are suggesting this could be the center of tropical marine diversity. For more info on Raja Ampat biodiversity, check out Conservation International's Rapid Assessment Program report at [http://www.biodiversityscience.org/xp/CABS/research/rap/marine\\_rap/indo-rap.xml](http://www.biodiversityscience.org/xp/CABS/research/rap/marine_rap/indo-rap.xml). Most standard dive sites near the Kri Base Camp are within a 30-minute boat ride — many only 10 to 15 minutes away. Underwater topography tends to be sloping reefs, which usually bottom out at anywhere from 80 to 110. Some sites off small rocks have mini-walls with incredible invertebrate life (Otto's Rock, Fam Wall). Be sure to check out The Passage. It's like diving a river (100 feet wide in places) and full of beautiful soft coral and other exotic life including archerfish, which gun down unsuspecting insects from the overhanging jungle branches with a well-aimed stream of spit. The currents are directly linked to tides and are relatively predictable, but they can be strong (2 knots +). Staff is tuned in to conditions and can help you seek out or avoid exciting conditions, depending on your wishes. Calmest seas are supposed to be in November and March. Both my trips were in summer (July and August). One time was relatively calm with some rain (July). The other trip, we never saw a drop of rain and was windy, though it's always possible to find protected sites. Camp conditions are basic but clean and true to low-impact, ecologically sound planning. Construction of the camp has used all local materials and

labor and is traditional Papuan. Sleeping is on single floor-level beds with mosquito netting. All camp structures are situated over the water and are exposed to nice tradewind breezes. In two visits, I haven't seen more than one or two mosquitoes, but anti-malarials are recommended. Staff is all local Papuan — helpful, shy, and they love to sing! Once comfortable with guests, they'll sometimes provide nighttime entertainment with guitars and huge homemade bass. Food is basic but tasty and healthy (fish, rice, local vegetables). Yolanda, the camp manager, provides guests what they need. Showers are mandi-style — barrels of water that are warmed by the daytime sun. Bring your own alcohol (buy before you arrive in Sorong) and arrange for beer if you want to drink more than one or two a night. There's minimal refrigeration there so don't expect lots of super cold drinks. This place holds a lifetime's worth of discovery. Not one to be missed by those who love western Pacific (especially Indonesian) diving. There are virtually no tourists, so there are no terrorist targets where one is especially vulnerable. Papuans are friendly, and there is no radical Islamic activity in the area. One suggestion: Fly to Singapore — Ujung Pandang — Sorong, thus avoiding Bali or Jakarta. One last note: No diving on Saturdays due to Seventh-Day Adventist sabbath. ([www.iriandiving.com](http://www.iriandiving.com))

### Kalimantan

**Sangalaki Dive Lodge, October 2002, Rick Tuss ([rtuss@aol.com](mailto:rtuss@aol.com)), Wilmington, DE.** Experience: 501-

1,000 dives. Vis: 40 to 80 feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, choppy, currents. Mantas, mantas, and more mantas. Dived and snorkeled with tens of mantas every day. They constantly feed in large numbers around the island. I had to snorkel with them nude. I am now known as the Great White Manta! The locals thought I was crazy. Turtles, turtles, and more turtles. Not quite as many as Sipadan, but plenty. This is one of the few marine parks in Indonesia that actually has a warden to look out for them. Observed females coming and leaving shore to lay eggs. Assisted many newborns to the ocean. Wonderful helping newborn turtles make a good start to their lives. Other marine life was abundant and the corals quite healthy. Saw multiple large groupers on one dive — a rarity in Indonesia as most get consumed! Great wall diving on close by islands. Jelly Fish Lake to snorkel in. The vis wasn't fantastic, but the plankton is why the mantas are there. The accommodations aren't five-star, but OK for a dedicated dive resort. The people were extremely friendly and wanted to please. At the end of the earth. International flight from Singapore to Balipapan, then domestic to Berau (ever flown an Indonesian domestic flight?). Serious weight restrictions on the domestic flight. Be prepared to pay additional for your dive gear! 2.5-hour boat ride from Berau to Sangalaki. The boat trip back was even worse in a small speedboat in rough seas. Everything needs to be brought into the small island of Sangalaki, including fresh water a couple of times a week. It's kind of like being on a large live-aboard, only it doesn't rock all the time (the island is

only about five acres). The food was marginal. It greatly improved at the end of the week. They hired a new cook, and she was really proud of her cooking. No shore diving! It's a shame because the house reef is great with super critters including mandarin fish, nudibranch, etc. SDL needs to put in a jetty out to the reef. No fresh water bucket on boats. Cameras were protected by laying them on an open life jacket in rear of boat. Did have separate fresh water troughs on shore to soak cameras. ([www.sangalaki.net/lodge.asp](http://www.sangalaki.net/lodge.asp))

### Sulawesi, North

**Celebes Divers, Mapia Resort, May 2003, Carl Scott (cdscott@swbell.net), Spring, TX.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 80 to 100 feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm, no currents. Subject matter for photography was endless. The marine life here is amazingly abundant, far exceeding numbers that I've seen at any Caribbean destination I've visited. Bunaken Marine Park is protected from the trade winds by the high (3,000+ feet) mountains of North Sulawesi, so the seas are glassy smooth each morning, not much different in the afternoons. While a decent current was encountered on one dive, all others were nearly absent of any noticeable current, making diving a breeze. All but a couple of the dive sites are walls, with the edge of the reef at about 20 feet and sloping gently upward towards shore — perfect for a long safety stop among thousands of tropicals at the end of each dive. These reefs were as healthy as I've seen anywhere. Celebes Divers is owned in partnership with Mapia Resort, and one

of the partners is a practicing marine biologist (not just a former biologist, but one who currently works with Italian universities), who really knows his stuff. Not only can this guy not be stumped on the scientific names of any local species, but he provides as much detail as you want to hear about their histories, habits, etc. They offer day trips across the island to Lembah Strait, which is worth the hour and a half van ride to the dock for anyone who is interested in seeing creatures that are rare, or absent, in other destinations, including the pygmy seahorse, ghost pipefish, beautiful nudibranchs, etc. Mapia is a rather simple resort, with cottages made of wood and furniture made of bamboo. Nothing fancy, but certainly adequate and comfortable. The bathrooms are not air conditioned, and there always seems to be one or two mosquitoes in there. They provide insect spray, if you want to use it. Also, they don't pick up the trash that washes ashore on the beach. This seems to be an endemic practice, judging from the surrounding areas. The restaurant is open air, but always a comfortable seaside atmosphere. The food was always a good home-cooked meal, and there was plenty of it. Breakfast is toast and fruit, with coffee and juices, but the cook was quick to accommodate me with an omelet. Typical dinner consisted of a combination of Italian and Indonesian dishes, with a choice between two different main courses. Dinner is served family style in four courses, providing a nice atmosphere for sharing stories, etc. All staff were eager to accommodate any request to the best of their abilities and smiles were plentiful. One thing that I enjoyed

was the constant singing of the staff while working, resting, etc. They love song, and they never sing out of key. Of course, English isn't spoken very well by most, so the words are a bit incomplete when they sing popular American songs (their favorite). All laundry left in the basket will be washed and delivered back to your room before you return from the day's diving. UW Photography Comments: the subject matter was endless! I shot over 600 frames in five days of diving (16 dives). However, the boats did not have a rinse tank or bucket.

Given the light crowd on board (three divers and crew), there was plenty of room for gear, and they encouraged the use of bottled water (there was always plenty on board) to give equipment a quick rinse. The owners are avid photographers, and, in fact, one of them brought his camera along two days to dive with us. Apparently, they don't value an immediate rinse in fresh water after a dive. There are equipment rinse tanks on shore, but not in proximity of the dock. Given the general level of service, however, I'm sure that a rinse bucket would have been provided, had one been requested prior to boarding (I never remembered, either!).

([www.kudalaut.com](http://www.kudalaut.com))

**Eco-Divers, Tasik Ria Resort, May 2003, David Van Rooy ([dave@seabelow.com](mailto:dave@seabelow.com)), Austin, TX.**

Experience: More than 1,000 dives. Vis: 40 to 120 feet. Water: 77 to 79 F, calm, choppy, currents, no currents. Generally a healthy reef system with good vis and lots of fish life. Sahaong off Bangka Island and Pangilugan off Manado Tua are among the best fish

dives I've ever seen — several large schools of fish off the reef overhead, blocking out the sun, with large jacks, tuna, and schools of barracuda checking them out. At other locations lots of schools of reef fish, esp. pyramid butterfly, longfin bannerfish, unicornfish, red-tooth triggers. Currents can be strong here, though generally we didn't have too much, but heard stories of such. Hard corals seem to dominate here over other parts of Indonesia and not so many invertebrates, but good diving nonetheless. Side trip available to Lembeh Strait (do it) to see the weird critters — always worth it, despite the two-hour bus ride each way. Three-hour boat ride to Bangka well worth it at least for the one dive we did — lots of colorful, soft corals here, great vis, and fish life. The dive operation was well run but more geared to taking care of divers and not giving as much freedom as I prefer. This is understandable with sometimes strong current conditions present, but not for some of us. Offered three dives/day. Good, fast boats though and staff helpful, competent, and friendly. Bring some anti-sting stuff for hydroids particularly — this area has some nasty ones. The resort resembles more a fancy beach resort — huge swimming pool, large manicured garden area, and good-sized, clean, and comfortable rooms. Food plentiful and OK but not to write home about. Only a couple of small camera rinse tanks on boats with up to 18 divers aboard. Not lots of camera work room. OK if there's not lots of photographers. E6 processing available on shore. Lots of fish life including a few of the more

unusual ones. ([www.eco-divers.com](http://www.eco-divers.com), [www.tasikria.com](http://www.tasikria.com))

**Kungkungan Bay Resort, October 2002, Barbara & Larry Murphy, Dunwoody, GA.** Five-week diving trip to Indonesia, which included Bali (we were there when the bombing took place) and, for two weeks, KBR; our third trip there. We left Bali for KBR three days after the bombing, and upon our arrival the resort already had hired private security to patrol the grounds 24 hours daily. Soon a detachment of Indonesian Water Police (unarmed) were stationed to live on the premises and finally another detachment of armed military, one of which was present on the dive boat with rifle in the ready. German intelligence from the embassy in Jakarta had warned that resort tourists would be kidnapping targets a la Sipadan, 2000. Apparently this threat was widely reported in the European press. We felt secure the entire time at KBR and applaud the resort for enlisting Indonesian military help. ([www.kungkungan.com](http://www.kungkungan.com))

**Kungkungan Bay Resort, January 2003, Nick Roger-Vasselin, Reno, NV.** Logged dives: 500+. Vis: 15/50 ft. Water: 80-84 F. We picked KBR for 1 week in January. I was only mildly enthusiastic, knowing I probably wouldn't see anything larger than my fist. I thought I would dive once or twice a day, and catch up on some reading. We flew from Bali to Manado, were greeted at the airport, and transported by minivan to the resort. The trip took about 1.5 hours. Quick orientation upon arrival, then we were

shown to our bungalow. The bungalow construction is shoddy at best, with not much attention to detail, or finish, but we figured we weren't going to be spending much time in the room, as we were here to dive. I forgot about diving once or twice a day, after 10 minutes into our first dive, I was hooked on the critters. Here is a partial list. Ornate ghost pipefish, stargazer, flamboyant cuttlefish, including hatching, frogfish of at least 5 different colors, razor fish, juvenile batfish, wonder puss, stonefish, devil scorpion fish, squat lobster found inside yellow and white, or black and white crinoids, zebra crabs, crinoid shrimp, anemone shrimp, hairy frogfish, giant seahorses, pygmy seahorses, (though they are only the size of a small grain of rice, even with a magnifier glass, they are hard to see in detail), blue ribbon eel, both adult and juvenile, mushroom corral pipefish, Pegasus sea moth, cockatoo wasp fish, hairy octopus, mantis shrimp, dragonet, jaw fish (pregnant), wart frogfish, crocodile fish, mandarin fish, banded sea snake, orang-outang crab. At one site, TK2, a banded sea snake swam to within 12 inches of a yellow frog fish. It actually looked like the frogfish was recoiling slightly in apprehension. Dive briefings are thorough, and expedient, then everybody heads out to the dive boat. Sites are generally within 10 minutes of the resort, so everything is handy. Very little current, back roll into the water and bottom time is generally limited to 45 minutes to 1 hour. Dive guides are excellent; my favorite is Nus, who nearly gave me whiplash on our first night dive, due to the incredibly large amount of critters he was

pointing out to us. The water is 80 to 84, which is warm, and in that temp I usually don't wear any protection, however because you are spending most of the dive barely moving, there is a definite chill. I wore a 2mm/1mm shorty and was comfortable, but some guests were wearing up to 5mm. Shore diving is excellent; the house reef literally starts as you walk into the water. Accommodations are Spartan. As mentioned the construction is not so good, mosquito screens are not maintained, but all in all, it is passable. Food is available 24 hours a day, and at first glance the menu looks excellent, though it is limited, and after a few days, you find yourself ordering the same thing time and time again. The kitchen staff is excruciatingly slow. It typically takes 1 hour for breakfast, so we started to order right before the morning dive, and asked them to have it ready when the dive boat returned. An incredible place to dive.

### **Kungkungan Bay Resort, March 2003, Jim Parkhill, Edinburg, TX.**

"Fine diving." — that is the motto that Kungkungan Bay Resort displays on its promotional material. The water is greasy, murky, and downright dirty. The dive sites are, for the most part, bleak, colorless, featureless expanses of litterstrewn gray sand and muck. "Fine diving" means the mind blowing experience of discovering critters that are rare, weird, otherworldly, prehistoric, awesome, and sometimes positively spooky. At the orientation guests were asked to write down their "wish list" of creatures that they would like to see so that a dive schedule can be organized to try to

ensure that they see everything that is on the list. Our group of six divers made up our combined list: Mimic octopus, wonderpus, hairy frogfish, mandarin fish, pygmy seahorse, harlequin ghost pipefish, stargazers, ambon cuttlefish, flamboyant cuttlefish, ambon scorpionfish, giant frogfish, pegasus seamount, weedy scorpionfish. By the time that four of us left after only four full days of diving, everything on the "menu" had been checked off except for the mimic octopus and the wonderpus. The two divers who stayed behind saw both of them on the first dive of the following day. Besides the critters listed above, I saw: flying gunards, coconut octopus, clown frogfish, devilfish, double ended pipefish, banded pipefish, banded sea snakes, ribbon eels, mantis shrimp, porcelain crabs, conger eels, blue spotted stingrays, scores of different types of nudibranchs and flatworms, and a host of strange things that I have yet to identify. The critters there are so camouflaged, so well integrated into their surroundings, so tiny that following a knowledgeable divemaster is simply requisite. And the KBR dive masters do not disappoint. Four boat dives per day at 8:15 a.m., 11:15 a.m., 2:45 p.m., and a night dive and unlimited diving on the shallow KBR house reef. Four dive boats that accommodate eight divers comfortably and all are covered. Most dive sites are less than a fifteen minute boat ride from KBR. Most sites are true muck dives. However, a few actually have some pretty coral formations and colorful walls. There are also a couple of wreck dives. Currents are non-existent to mild. Most dives are in the 50 to 60 foot range. The visibility can range



from a sucky 20 feet to a maximum of perhaps 60 feet. Water is a comfortable 78 to 82 degrees. Surface temperatures average 85 degrees during the day, falling into the 70s at night. Coffee or tea is delivered to your room every morning. When your dive boat returns after every dive, a staff member is waiting with steaming hot, freshly baked pastry and a choice of coffee, tea, or hot chocolate. Returning from the dives prior to lunch or dinner, a member of the wait staff brings the dining room menu to the dive dock to take your order so that your food is served as soon as you get to the dining room. Hot chocolate and fruit are handed to you as soon as you ascend the boat ladder at the end of a dive. The restaurant is open 24 hours a day. Charges are only for soft drinks and alcoholic beverages. All of the staff calls each guest by name. The smiles are omnipresent and contagious. The bungalows are comfortable with roomy bathrooms and a living area. Housekeeping is meticulous. There is no air conditioning but with strategically placed ceiling fans, many windows, and the prevailing sea breezes, none is necessary. There are two separate dive briefing and suit up shacks and abundant space and hangers for storing gear between dives. One huge fresh water tank is provided for rinsing wet suits and booties, while two others are devoted exclusively for cameras. A hot water shower on the dock is a wonderful touch. A separate building near the dock has two dozen work stations with individual overhead fluorescent lights and both 110 and 220 outlets for charging. Fresh towels are laid out on the workbench surface. This area is open 24

hours a day. The KBR main dining room is enormous and beautifully designed utilizing native materials. The food is excellent, although the menu selections are limited if one is staying for several days. An outside, over-the-water veranda is a tranquil and lovely area to sip morning coffee while watching the sun rise across the strait or to relax over an after dinner drink. Above the main dining room is a lounge with a well equipped entertainment center and facilities for viewing slides. KBR offers on site E-6 processing. The grounds are lush and exquisitely landscaped. Tipping at KBR is expressly discouraged, although all of us surreptitiously passed along a gratuity to our divemasters and boat boys. KBR is located near the town of Bitung about an hour and a half drive from the Manado airport on North Sulawesi. Transport to and from the airport is part of the KBR package. The all-inclusive rate at KBR is \$141US per person per day, plus \$35US per dive. There is a new dive resort across the strait from KBR. The dive operation is run by the Murex Resort out of Manado. The new resort does offer Nitrox which, at this writing, KBR did not. If an overnight stay is required in Manado, there are two good hotels from which to choose. Hotel Gran Puri in the city center has a good dining room that offers a buffet at both breakfast and lunch in addition to a la carte fare. The hotel has a full service spa and a pool. It is connected by covered walkway to a small mall. The rate is a reasonable \$47US per day double. The other hotel is the Ritzy which is near the waterfront and close to Manado's largest mall. Our round trip airfare between Singapore

and Manado on Silkair was \$398US per person, coach class.

### **Kungkungan Bay Resort, July/August 2003, Mel McCombie, New Haven, CT, and Harris Friedberg.**

Number of dives: about 1400 each. We booked this trip to KBR for its fabled service, food, and of course diving. In June, our excellent travel agent, Marty Dawson, told us KBR had let go of most of its staff and offered to rebook us at the new Lembeh Resort. We decided that a resort so fabled among divers couldn't have let things slide, so we decided to stick with it — despite that its cost was exactly twice that of the Lembeh Resort. Although the diving was superb, of an original staff of 120, KBR was running on a skeleton staff of 32. The dive staff worked like Trojans. Nus and his guides asked us what we wanted to see and found all of it. If you wanted to see a mimic octopus or an ornate ghost pipe fish or an undescribed pygmy seahorse, they found it. Service was impeccable: the only time you touched your gear was when you were in the water. But the hotel and kitchen staff were overwhelmed. Our problems ranged from little ones like late service (ordering breakfast at 7:15 and having it appear at 8AM, with an 8:15 dive), to serious ones like acute food shortages. Of the ten days we were there, there was never any beef or pork; only chicken and seafood were available. One day there were no eggs; they ran out of the cheap jug wine after 2 days and didn't buy more for a week (though we asked). The staff forgot to deliver morning coffee our first day (another one of those touches KBR is noted for); another day,

we returned to the room after two dives at 1:30 PM to find it had not been cleaned; we had no towels. When we mentioned this to the front desk, we were told that the housekeeper was sick that day. The owner was apologetic that these problems were affecting our stay, but noted that owing to economic bad times, we just had to live with it. Had we stayed at the Lembeh Resort, we could have saved about \$3000. Out of curiosity, we went over and toured around the resort. It is gorgeous — huge rooms, with Bali-style bathrooms with both indoor and outdoor showers; airco in the bedrooms; coffee and tea making in each room — all features lacking at KBR. We also ate dinner there one night, and had a good meal of wild pig and beef curry with a bottle of French merlot (again, all unavailable at KBR). The Lembeh Resort also has a pool and Nitrox (need I say not available at KBR?). It is shiny and new, and much of the staff are alumni of KBR. We saw everything except the blue ring octopus (and not for lack of trying). Nus and his staff made sure we saw everything on our wish list (one day alone, we saw nine ornate ghost pipefish); my personal ugly favorite, *inamicus didactylus*; all kinds of waspfish; more frogfish in more sizes, from giant footballs to tiny near-pygmy; mantis and harlequin shrimps; the mimic octopus; helmet gumnards; not to mention pretty fish like butters and angels, and corals. Water was on the chillier side, unlike Bunaken — 76-80 degrees F. We wore thick suits and since the staff practically carries you around, wearing the extra weight was no problem. Vis tended to be fair to awful, but again the excellent staff

always seemed to know where you were. Currents ranged from 0-60, sometimes on the same dive. The house reef was beautiful, as KBR pays locals not to fish on it.

**Kungkungan Bay Resort, September 2003, Leslie Chow (lchow@sonic.net), San Francisco, CA.** Experience: 501-1,000 dives. Vis: 20 to 70 feet. Water: 78 to 82 F, calm. Diving in the Lembe Strait is as terrific as ever. New discoveries (since our visit in '99) include a new type of pygmy seahorse (white, narrow body with red/green streaks) and blue-ringed octopus. We saw the usual cast of great muck creatures including several types of ornate ghost pipefish, hairy frogfish, clown frogfish, hairy filefish, hairy scorpion fish, ribbon eels, several types of nembrotha nudis, stargazers, mating mandarin fish, a variety of octopus (no mimic this time though, alas!), pygmy and regular seahorses, waspfish, leaf scorpion fish, flamboyant cuttlefish, and, surprisingly, an enormous, pristine coral field at Batu Angus. With the addition of 2 new land-based resorts on Lembe, a Thai live-aboard in semi-permanent residence plus Manado day-trippers, the Lembe Strait has become much more heavily serviced for divers. It was not uncommon to see 2 or 3 boats at our dive site, although each boat carried only a few divers. Kungkungan Bay Resort is the largest and oldest (9 years) of the Lembe Strait dive operations; we were the only 2 guests for half of our visit, with a maximum of 4 divers during the rest of our stay. This is both good and bad — the pro's being high levels of service and attention plus you

call the shots on what dive spots and what you'd like to see. The staff is as friendly and helpful as ever. Cons are that KBR has laid off over half of its staff from a few years ago, with most staff working only part-time and the mood is downbeat. Some former staff work at the other Lembe dive operations. The first permanent KBR resort manager since 1999 arrived 2 weeks before our trip and is working on deferred maintenance on the bungalows, boats and grounds. The new resort manager has extensive hotel experience in Asia/Pacific and has plans for adding a pool and more topside amenities as well as a number of 10th anniversary resident photo/bio experts and events for next year. Nus remains as manager of the diving operations, and is a terrific asset. Terrorism has not been an issue in predominantly Christian Northern Sulawesi, and we felt quite safe in Sulawesi as well as our follow-on stay in Ubud, Bali (where there were also much lower numbers of tourists).

## Sulawesi, Southeast

**Wakatobi, November 2002, David Blatt, Boulder, CO.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 30 to 100 feet. Water: 80 to 85 F, calm. The reef is the most pristine and diverse reef that I have ever experienced. From one dive to the next you never know what creature you will encounter. Dive sites at some places begin and end with sand or rubble with no more reef to be found. At Wakatobi you don't know where one dive site ends and another begins. The house reef — a few kicks away from the

shore and over the wall and you are in paradise. I shot eight hours of video in 46 dives, including a half an hour of mandarin fish. If you can stay in the grand bungalows, you have more space and your own bathroom. In the long-house, you share a bathroom with the other guests, and the rooms are smaller but still more than comfortable. The food was abundant as well as tasty. This is not a luxury resort, but it offers all the amenities that are needed or can be expected in such a remote diving location. Wakatobi is for people who love the underwater realm and all it has to offer. It takes some time to get there but it is worth the trip. And while you are in Indonesia do some sightseeing on Bali. The Balinese people are some of the friendliest and peace loving people I have met in all my travels. The land is so beautiful, and the crafts available in Ubud are amazing and inexpensive. The people really need your tourist dollars now because they rely on it for most of their income. They were victims of the bombing as well. I felt safe the entire time I was in Indonesia. The resort has a large camera room with plenty of space. Bringing an extra power strip, can come in handy if many photographers are on the trip. ([www.wakatobi.com](http://www.wakatobi.com))

**Wakatobi Dive Resort, November 2002, Mimi Greenberg (Itlmi@aol.com), Los Angeles, CA.**

Experience: 101-250 dives. Every dive was a magnificent profusion of colors, teeming with healthy corals, sponges, critters, fish. One dive was so congested with living creatures that it caused a fish jam. We had to stop to

give them the right of way. Diving these waters truly sets the paradigm for all warm water diving. Alas, the same cannot be said for the resort, which came with a high price tag for the week and was devoid of most creature comforts. Bottom line: if you are a dive warrior who enjoys 5+ dives per day and has no use for reading lights, fresh towels, room ventilation, trash pickup, enough food at each meal for everyone to get a first helping of each dish, brewed coffee that doesn't cost an additional \$1 per cup, you will love this place.

**Wakatobi Dive Resort, July 2003, Gar & Emily MacRae, Culver City, CA.** Vis: 60-80 ft. Water: 76 to 78 F.

Pristine reefs and walls with fabulous soft and hard corals, unlimited house reef diving. If you are counting on seeing sharks you may be disappointed. Wakatobi offers 10 to 14 day schedules. From the west coast of the U.S. it takes at least 21 hours to arrive in Bali, where you connect to a 2 hour charter flight to Sulawesi. Spend a couple of days in Bali to take in the sights and recover from jet lag. We stayed at the Pansea Puri Bali on Jimbaran Beach, which we highly recommend. Wakatobi has six individual grand bungalows with king size beds and a main long house with single beds. The food was some of the best we've tasted at a dive resort. The entire staff treated us wonderfully. Two morning boat dives followed by an afternoon dive or you could hang back at the resort and dive the house reef all day long (or all week long and never see everything the house reef

had to offer). Dive masters John and Steve gave detailed briefings on reef topography, sea life and suggested photo settings. The dive staff accommodated the variety of diving styles and interests without fail. Sea creatures you might run across on your dives would be banded sea snakes, scorpion fish, frogfish, leaf fish, crocodile fish, pipefish, blue ribbon eels, stonefish, cleaner shrimp, porcelain crabs and seven varieties of anemone fish. We dove in 3mm wetsuits, which suited us fine but if you want to stay warmer the resort recommends 5mm.

**Wakatobi, August 2003, William Deertz (wdeertz@centrin.net.id), Los Angeles, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 25 to 75 feet. Water: 78 to 81 F, calm. Fantastic resort in very remote area with outstanding diving. Their claim for the “world’s best house reef” is absolutely true. Several new bungalows added, eventually resort will be all bungalows as long house is converted to photo studio/training classrooms. Food was nothing short of spectacular especially when you consider the remoteness of the site.

Generally 3 boat dives per day to nearby sites, longest boat ride was maybe 40 minutes. Unlimited shore dives on the house reef remainder of day.

Recent air charter from Bali makes this a very easily reached destination in comfort. Overall the coral is in excellent, pristine condition. Minimal pelagics but then again you aren’t going here to see that sort of stuff, it’s the small critters that are in amazing abundance. Plenty of space in the newly air conditioned camera/charging room.

## MALAYSIA

Sipadan, the tiny island off Malaysian Borneo, was the scary site for a political kidnapping of divers in 1999, so before considering this destination, get information from your government. Sipadan is crowded with new resorts. 20 to 30 giant turtles on every dive, sharks, jacks, schooling barracuda, and the best shore diving anywhere. While there’s an abundance of turtles year-round, counts are highest in July and August, although the reef in front of the resorts is showing signs of distress from the crowds. ... Layang Layang Resort is a relatively young resort in the Spratly Islands; because of their oil reserves, the islands are claimed by China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, and Taiwan as well as Malaysia. Schooling hammerheads and pristine reefs lure divers, but nothing lives on the flat coral atoll except birds. ... Hammerhead season is March and April, but the resort operates from March to October.

### Layang Layang

**Layang-Layang Resort, October 2002, Capt. Lada Simek, Ossining, NY.** Experience: 1,000+ dives.

Layang-Layang is an atoll about five miles in diameter, about 250 miles west of Borneo. As you fly in, you do not see an island, only a white, new, concrete runway with a small naval base at one end and a resort at the other. The distance from land, (coupled