



I'm gliding along a long, smooth slope of fine, black sand, which stretches away in all directions, as far as I can see in the 20-metre vis. As clear and still as the water is, the light seems muted, like on a deeply-clouded day, creating a subdued, utterly peaceful scene. I find myself still occasionally chuckling at the local Bunaken divers' name for this site – Betlehem. It's a sort-of acronym for 'Better than Lembeh', a good-natured reference to Lembeh Straits, long regarded as one of the world's most-famous muck/critter dive sites, which is located some 70km due east, on the opposite side of Sulawesi.

This dive immediately becomes a wonder... it's apparent that every small obstruction, rock or sponge colony is a tiny oasis of critter life. At one, there are two yellow thorny seahorses; as I move in close for macro-images, I become aware of a tiny, three-centre-metre-long baby broad-club cuttlefish, so utterly camouflaged as to have been practically invisible. Before reaching the next oasis, a faint outline in the dark bottom becomes the barely exposed mouth and face of a horned flathead, then, moments later, there is the pale, skull-like face and jagged, toothy grin of a stargazer. Then there is a large, dark anemone; I look closely to find that it is shared by a pair of porcelain crabs and a family of saddleback anemonefish...

The long, effortless dive – at 20m of depth, my 15-litre, EANx-filled cylinder lasts seemingly forever – goes on and on this way, with small pockets of life, one after another, with many species I've never before had the opportunity to photograph. When it is finally time to turn the dive, we move up into shallower water, through a broad, grass bed. There, we find pufferfish, crabs, more cuttlefish, and many more small species... especially unique is a green, six-centimetre-long roughsnout pipefish, bobbing head-down, almost indistinguishable from the blades of grass around it.

As we arrive at the pick-up point, an old mooring base of small stone blocks, Bethlehem just won't let us go. In the crevices are two white-eyed morays, scores of white-banded cleaner shrimp, several nudibranchs and two magnificent, long-spine lionfish, a variety I have never photographed before.

As I hang in the quiet water on my safety stop, I marvel at the memory of all the remarkable creatures I've just seen, along with the muck night-dive I was able to do immediately following our late-afternoon arrival at the resort the previous day. Although I've done a lot muck shooting over the years, I've never before found so many species, or captured so many images, in such a concentrated, short time – ever. As amazed as I am at that moment, however, it's what I yet don't know that will really make this first day of diving around Bunaken so unique.

Before the day is done, I'll have a second critter dive just up the coastline, at Bulu Cape, a coral and rubble-covered slope where we find peacock mantis shrimp, blue-ribbon eels, many different nudibranchs, a dusky-red, spine-cheeked anemonefish, numerous live sea shells, box-fish, several orangutan crabs... and much more.

We'll also have made the quick trip back to Bunaken Island for a lunch in the Bunaken Oasis Resort's hillside (gourmet, by the way) restaurant, which overlooks the sea and Manado Tua volcano. Then we will have headed back out to a favourite Bunaken dive site, just minutes from

REMARKABLE BUNAKEN

AL HORNSBY finds an oasis in the dive hotspot of Bunaken Marine Park in North Sulawesi, Indonesia, which is giving back to the community as well as providing a five-star experience

Photographs by **AL HORNSBY**



the resort's dock. Known as Lekuan, this site is a steep, gorgonian-covered, overhang-laden wall, beautiful in its own right, but unique in the numbers of large (I mean very large) green turtles that seemed to be everywhere, resting at various points along the wall. Especially nice was that the coral-covered wall top is shallow and still... my wife and daughter were able to snorkel above us, also marveling at repeated close encounters with the turtles, as we slowly made our way along the wall at 15-20m.

From there, we had motored to a nearby shallow reef area off the end of Bunaken for a snorkelling session over huge growths of coral in clear, still water. Swarms of schooling fish of several different species moved about, and damsels, butterflyfish and angelfish moved in and out of coral crevices.

Even with all this, we were back at the resort in time to take pictures of the sun setting behind the volcano in a blaze of golden glory. Later, relaxing in the resort's open-air lounge, I had to conclude that day one in Bunaken had been remarkable; in the dive sites' and species' variety, as well as in the ease of the diving - with short, comfortable boat trips, superb dive logistics and the calm, clear water conditions. I could only wonder - with a big smile - what day two would bring.

What I was to discover was that my first day, as unique as it had seemed, was actually merely typical of this incredible dive location. Located just a brief, 20km boat ride out from Manado, the capital city of Sulawesi, Indonesia, the island sits at the edge of the Bunaken Marine National Park, formed to protect a large area of complex reefs and walls known for its variety of marine life and

healthy corals. Remembering that Sulawesi is also considered the world's most-known muck-diving destination, the entire area is also blessed with an amazing number of species that live on sand - white and black - and muck, rubble, low-coral and grass-covered bottom.

Diving from Bunaken, there is the park, plus many kilometres of the western Sulawesi shoreline, available in boat runs generally of 20-40 minutes. And, the small island's house reefs are prolific as well, inhabited by many of the same species. It's no wonder that the Bunaken Oasis' Dive Centre's 'nearby' dive site map shows 68 different sites. Besides the ones already described, my favourites were:

Tiwoho night dive - Less than a half-hour from Bunaken, Tiwoho is due east, just off the mainland shoreline. Black sand covers a plain at 20m, at the bottom of a coral-covered slope. The life was remarkable... in our dive I photographed carpet soles, lionfish, stargazers, a helmet gunnard, an ocelated frogfish, a leaf scorpionfish, horned flatheads, an exquisite ornate octopus, large, red hermit crabs in volute shells and many others.

Pangulingan - Just off Manado Tua, the massive extinct volcano that rises from the sea off the western end of Bunaken, this dive site is a classic deep slope, high-energy, current-drift dive. Moving down to 30m, we flew past coral structures, gorgonians and soft corals, with schools of circular spadefish and meandering white-tip sharks. Often seen is a swirling, resident school of blackfin



barracuda, which congregate in the very clear – at least 30 metres on our dive – water. Toward dive’s end, we came up to drift along the gentle current at less than 10m, moving over fields of hard corals and small bommies, and many reef fish, especially snapper, sweetlips, grouper and squirrelfish.

Siladen Point – At the end of small Siladen Island, just off Bunaken’s northeastern coast, a beach and anchorage is popular with snorkellers as well as divers during surface intervals. Out from shore the wall drops away steeply, forming a series of beautiful dive sites. In very clear water, the wall is rich with gorgonian fans, delicate corals and soft corals of many different colors, as lovely a wall as one will ever see. Schools of fusiliers and redtooth triggerfish moved about in the water off the wall, and at one point, a large, tightly-packed school of long-jawed mackerel made several passes by us.

CONCLUSION

With all that can be said about the wonderful diving here, our host resort, Bunakan Oasis, can’t be left out of the story, because it is also an important part of our Bunaken visit. Conceived by long-time divers and environmentalists, its goal in being created was to be world’s finest five-star diving resort, built and operated upon a commitment to environmental principles. As goals go, these were lofty ones; in our experience, they are goals well-met.

If you are wondering if we enjoyed our dive trip to Bunaken, I’d have to say yes; yes, indeed. ■



THE BUNAKEN OASIS STORY

Like most fine things, Bunaken Oasis Resort and Spa did not come about through a direct, simple path, but at the end of a marvellous story. English couple Elaine and Simon Wallace, long-time divers who frequented the fine dive resorts and liveboards in the Asia-Pacific region, had come to be friends with well-known Sulawesi dive instructor and guide, Maruf 'Acho' Tajudin over the years.

Acho, from Bunaken, finally returned home after a long period working abroad, and seeing a need for local children to learn to protect their local marine environment – plastic debris is an institutional problem in many island nations in Asia – and to have improved job opportunities, he envisioned a dive centre and school for children, to teach them to dive; about diving tourism and about protecting the environment. In seeking to put together support for turning the idea into reality, he contacted his old friends, the Wallaces, and told them he had found a nice piece of land for sale where he hoped he could build his centre. They came to visit, and in Elaine's words, 'We simply fell in love with the beautiful place'.

They bought the five-hectare property, and decided to not just support Acho's school, but to build the dive resort they had always dreamed of, using everything they had learned in visiting the world's best-known resorts over the years. Along with their partner Acho, they also envisioned how a small, island resort, by committing itself to the environment and the betterment of the local residents' lives, could make a real difference there, and serve as an example throughout the region.

Having opened in October 2016, Bunaken Oasis Dive Resort and Spa has built the following, in a truly five-star dive resort setting:

A dive and environmental practices programme for local schoolchildren (their 'donations' for the programme, instead of money, are bags of plastic debris picked up around the island),

Free English-language education for island residents,

A self-contained, water desalination plant that supplies the resort (which includes having a modern cold and hot water dispenser in each guest cottage) and free water for all local Bunaken residents, All resort furniture and boats having been built on-island, Organic gardens, which provide much of the resort's fine dining restaurant's fresh produce and fruits, The establishment of an NGO that has arranged regular pick-up by the government of plastic debris collected by local residents and other on-island resorts and taken to a central drop-off point, Daily cleaning of local beaches for plastic debris. The resort has 12 luxury cottages; swimming pool with deep, scuba-training tank; hillside cocktail lounge and a gourmet restaurant; full spa; dive centre, photo room (which could easily be nominated as 'the world's finest'), guest gear locker, classroom and four dive boats (generally four divers per boat except for groups wishing to dive together) and a catamaran; Wi-Fi; and, everything, from the décor, amenities and cuisine to the friendly, attentive service, are just what one would envision in a truly five-star experience. Plus, as a special treat, a local Sulawesi cuscus - a very cute opossum-cousin - pays periodic visits, to the delight of both young and old alike.

www.bunakenoasis.com

