

Indonesia's Sulawesi

Muck diving & diversity

Text and photos by Eric Hanauer





Text and photos by Eric Hanauer
www.ehanauer.com

Sulawesi is one of those places on nearly every diver's bucket list. If not, it ought to be. A dozen years ago, people would have thought you daft to go diving there, much less build a dive resort in an area dominated by dark volcanic sand. Yet in Sulawesi there are nearly two dozen resorts vying for divers' dollars, yen and euros.

Sulawesi came on my radar when I first set eyes on Roger Steene's book, *Coral Seas*, published in 1998. At the time, the last thing on my wish list was another coffee table book. I had been diving nearly 40 years and thought I'd seen just about everything I wanted to see underwater. But when I spotted the weird, exotic animals in that book, I realized what I'd been missing. An inordinate number of them were photographed in Sulawesi.

My first trip to Sulawesi was in 2005 on the liveaboard *Aqua One*, motor-ing through Bunaken and Lembeh Strait. When I returned home and matched all the critters still miss-

ing against Steene's book, I vowed to return. I've never been a fan of checklist diving, but after seeing shots of mimic octopuses, rhinopiases, bob-bit worms and stargazers, I realized that I'd missed the boat. So, when the opportunity finally arose, nobody had to twist my arm.

This time, it would be a slow and leisurely two weeks, split between two land based resorts: Cocotinos in the Bunaken area, and Kasawari in Lembeh Strait. Bunaken Island features the dropoffs, walls and colorful invertebrate life we all associate with the tropical Indo-Pacific. Yet, there's also excellent muck diving offshore. Lembeh Strait has a few coral reefs to

Flamboyant cuttlefish (above); Banggai cardinalfish school (left); Wonderpus in water column (previous page)



Sulawesi

He seemed to know where every frogfish of every color was hanging out, as well as every boxfish and pipefish. The best spot was a rubble pile with three sea horses and two kinds of scorpionfish. Despite the walls, I spent most of my dives at Cocotinos shooting macro.

Kasawari

At Kasawari Lembah Resort, I renewed acquaintances with two Indonesian divers who had pioneered the art of muck diving: Nuswanto Lobbu and Ali Umasangadji. Nus is now the manager of Kasawari, complaining that his office duties preclude very much diving. Although he is a

go along with all the bottom dwelling critters. The good news is that both are within a two-hour drive from Manado's airport, Bunaken on the western side of the peninsula and Lembeh to the east.

Muck diving

First, let's define Sulawesi's brand of muck diving. The substrate isn't really muck, but dark brown to black volcanic sand. That's important for several reasons. First, the big grains settle quickly instead of remaining in suspension and destroying visibility. Second, it's okay for a diver to lie down on the bottom, allowing for eye level shots. No delicate corals will be smushed, but watch out for urchins and stargazers and the like. Finally, the dark colors won't be blown out by the lights of strobes, providing an excellent background for underwater photographs and videos.

Bunaken

Bunaken Island is about a 45-minute boat ride from Cocotinos Boutique Beach Resort. It's a series of classic

wall dives with virtually every inch covered by sponges, tunicates and hard corals. Clouds of anthias flitter about the reef, joined by fusiliers in the blue. What's missing is big critters; a shark sighting was a big deal. But to me the big deals were mating nudibranchs, ribbon eels, a juvenile lionfish and an extremely cooperative jawfish. I kept peering down the wall, but the computer and Nitrox nixed those thoughts.

The first thing my guide, Tono, promised was to find me a pygmy seahorse. The first thing I replied was that everybody had pygmy seahorse photos, I'm not into super macro, so let's find other things. Tono seemed relieved.

relative newcomer to underwater photography, Nus' uncanny ability to find critters has resulted in images that make the pros jealous. Ali, despite many years of guiding, still radiates joy when finding rare and exotic marine



LEFT TO RIGHT: Carrier crab with fire urchin; Amicus scorpionfish; Hairy frogfish



their nuptials. My problem was that three layers of red plastic made the light too dim to focus by.

On the following night, I used only one layer, which was like no red light at all. But I aimed it downward, until the mandarins began their upward sprint into ecstasy. Then, I was able to get the beam on them, autofocus and shoot. That technique resulted in about five times the keepers of the previous night. Mandarins are the most beautiful fishes on the reef, and they know it.

Bobbit worm

Another night critter on my wish list was a bobbit worm. A meter or more

the bottom. After a few strobe flashes, he seemed to resent this invasion of privacy and buried the female in the sand, leaving only her eyes protruding.

Mandarinfish

Mating mandarin fishes at dusk presented a different challenge. For those who haven't tried shooting them, the exercise consists of

50 minutes of boredom followed by five minutes of chaotic action. That's when the male and female suddenly spurt out of the coral maze into the water column, release their eggs and sperm, and dash back under cover. Common practice is to use a red modeling light to avoid inhibiting

life. In Sulawesi's muck, a shooter is almost totally dependent upon the guides. Occasionally, I was able to locate my own subjects, but for at least 80 percent of the images in this spread, credit must be shared with Tono, Ali, Robin, Hanni and Indra.

Critters

On the first night dive in Lembeh, I made a find of my own: a pair of mating crabs. The male was on top of the female, and slowly dragged her along



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Mandarinfish pair; Box crab; Diver hovers over lush reef; Bobbit worm; Mating crabs



Sulawesi

Rhinopias is an exotic variety of scorpionfish, another ambush predator that crawls along the bottom on prehensile "feet." It took nearly all of the two weeks to find one. Then Indra and I were grubbing around the bottom when we ran into some other divers and guides. He inquired via signs and a slate, and they took us to the rhinopias. At first glance, it was disappointing: a tiny brown fish about the size of a child's fist. But strobe shots showed it to be a brilliant orange. My final shot was the keeper: mouth open, lit from underneath for a touch of menace. There are six species of rhinopias; this one was an Eschmeyer's.

Mimic octopus

The mimic octopus is the star of the show in Lembeh. This unusual

cephalopod gets its name from the incredible shape, texture and color shifting it goes through to escape from predatory photographers. These shapes may include a ray, a sea star, a lionfish,



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Stargazer; Rhinopias; Mimic octopus

long, it stays mostly buried in the sand, but will dart up when a piece of bait is dangled out there. It won't stay for long, just grabbing for the bait and retreating again. Depending on your frame of reference, it resembles a sandworm from the *Dune* books by Frank Herbert, or a big penis.

The animal was named after Lorena Bobbit, who chopped off her husband's organ after he had been unfaithful. Carrying the parallel a step further, a popular folk myth states that the female worm bites off the male's penis after copulation and feeds it to her young. Not true. Bobbit worms are broadcast spawners, releasing sperm and eggs into the water column. Mama will never see her ugly babies.

Stargazers

One basic rule I followed in Lembeh was to never miss a night dive. I had botched my stargazer shots on the previous trip, so I asked Ali to find me one. It was like ordering food off a menu. He found not

one, but several.

A little fish swam close by, and the stargazer erupted out of the sand and inhaled it. I was too slow on the trigger to catch the action.

Stargazers are so ugly they are cute. Their perpetual toothy frown is reminiscent of a stonefish, as is their Jabba the Hutt shape and venomous spines. Like frogfish, they have a fleshy lure that attracts victims for ambush predation.

Rhinopias

A rhinopias was at the top of my wish list.



or even a crab. Whether these shapes are random or intentional is open to conjecture, but either way it's quite a performance. The wonderpus is a close relative, with shape-shifting

talents of its own, but not to the extent of the mimic. How can a diver tell them apart? The mimic octopus has a white stripe running down the underside of each tentacle. Both species were discovered only within the past 15 years.

Lasting Impressions

After a while I started looking for more on my own. Fire urchins often hide tiny zebra crabs in their spines. They in turn are often carried along the bottom on the backs of carrier crabs. Delicate porcelain crabs may be found in the same anemones as clownfishes. Slipper lobsters roam the sand at night on long, spindly legs. The giant among Lembeh nudibranchs is the solar power nudie, nearly a foot long, with fleshy lobes all along its body.

One of my favorite sites from the earlier trip was the police pier. Among the rubble, there were hundreds of the beautiful Banggai cardinalfishes, hanging out among sea urchins, anemones and old tires. Unfortunately, the pier is now actively used by big boats, so diving underneath and around it is forbidden.

However, we did make a dive about 50 yards away, where we encountered a white mantis shrimp. I'd seen all sorts of colorful mantis shrimps but this was the first white one. I suspect it's a regular stop on the police pier tour.

By the end of two weeks, the only critter missing on my to-do list was the blue ringed octopus. But that's a good thing, because it's a strong incentive to return—as if I needed an excuse. ■



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Squat lobster on nudibranch; Juvenile banggai cardinalfish in pink anemone; Close-up portrait of a pipefish

FACT FILE

GETTING THERE From Singapore, Silk Air, a subsidiary of Singapore Airlines, has regular flights to Manado. Most resorts will pick you up at the airport by van. Rides to the resort range from one to two hours.

PASSPORT A current passport with 6 months remaining is required. A 30 day visa is \$US25, payable at the immigration counter in US dollars or rupiah. Airport departure tax is 100,000 rupiah, payable in rupiah. (Don't panic, see next paragraph.)

CURRENCY One euro is equivalent to 11,811 Indonesian Rupiah Credit cards are accepted in almost all tourist facilities. ATMs are located in most towns.

LANGUAGE Bahasa Indonesian. English and Japanese is widely spoken in tourist facilities.

ELECTRICITY 230 volts, European and/or British plugs

CLIMATE Tropical humid. December through April is the rainy season, but diving is good all year round. Water temperatures range from 26 to 28 degrees Celsius (78 to 82 degrees Fahrenheit). A 3mm wet suit will be sufficient for most divers.

TOURIST FACILITIES Those catering to American/European clientele offer a wide range of amenities including Nitrox, wifi, satellite television, spa and massages, and land excursions.

WEBSITES
Cocotinos Cocotinos-manado.com
Kasawari Kasawari-lembeh.com

Thanks to Cocotinos and Kasawari resorts for their help in preparing this article.