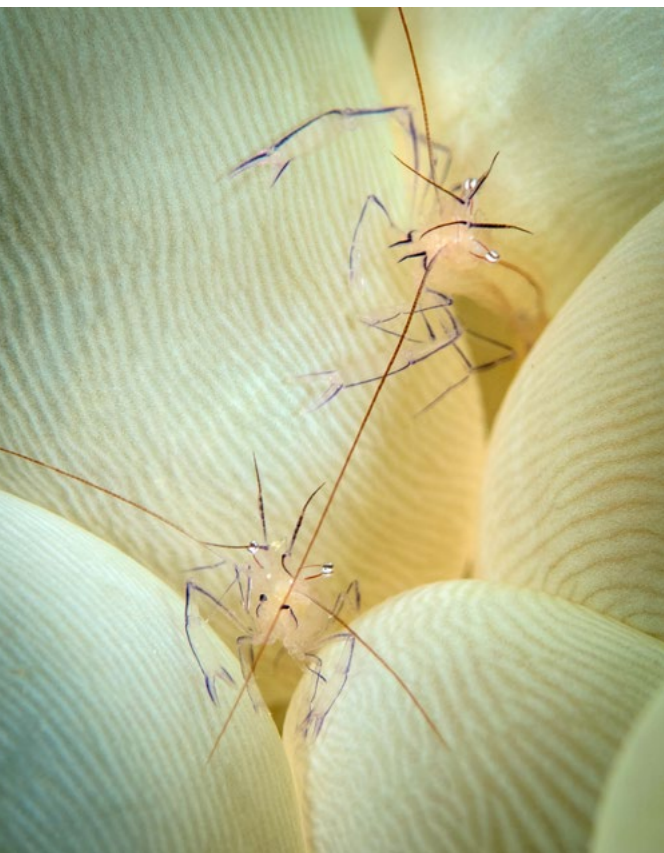


Indonesia's
North Sulawesi

Text and photos by Brandi Mueller





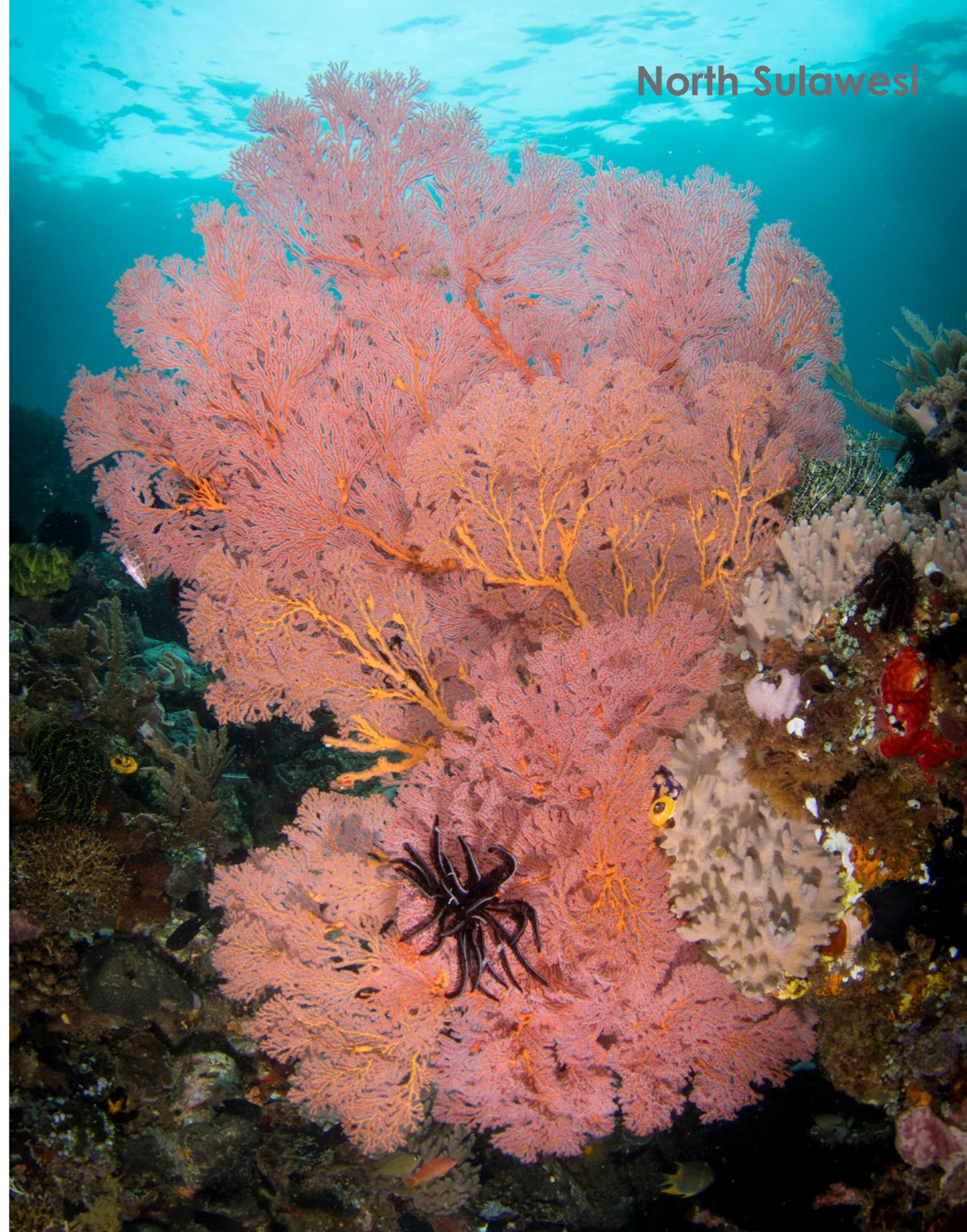
Bubble coral shrimp on bubble coral

The current felt like the wind on a breezy day, and it was blowing me past the coral-covered sheer wall that disappeared over 60m (200ft) below me. Looking directly down, I noticed the color blue fading into slightly darker shades and finally into darkness, at the edge of how far I could see.

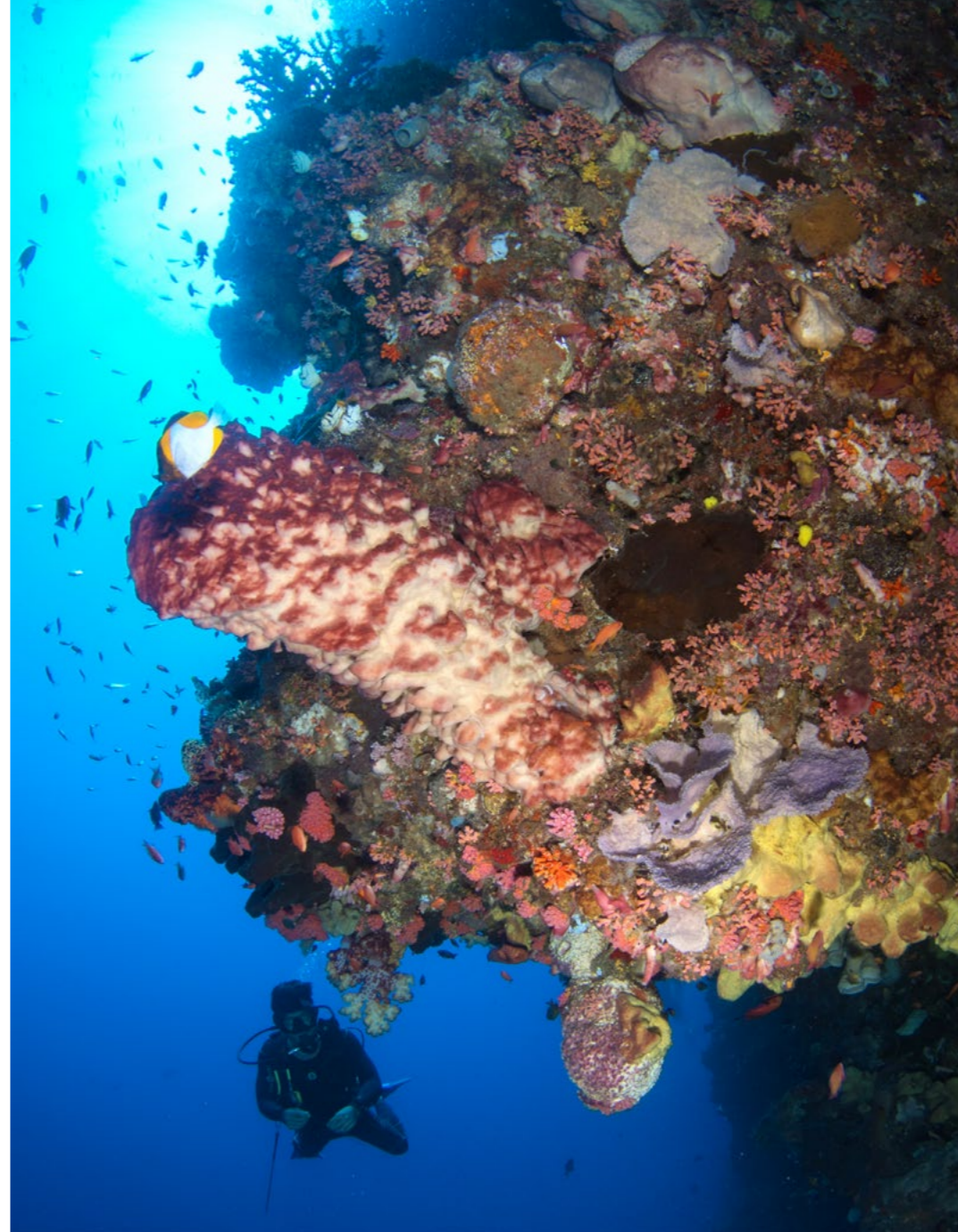
To my right was a gorgeous wall of color. Pink and purple soft corals extended fully, reaching out into the current to feed on plankton passing by and numerous giant purple barrel sponges extending away from the wall. Looking to my left into the open water was more blue and thousands of fish. Butterflyfishes, including the largest congregation of pyramid butterflyfishes I have ever seen, fluttered about in the water column, seeming to move in sync with one another.

Turtles clearly dominated this space. I could not go more than a few minutes without seeing one sleeping in a crevasse or on a comfy-looking sponge. When I looked out into the mass of small fish off the wall, sea turtle silhouettes could be seen moving toward the surface for a breath of air.

The current continued to carry me along the wall. Suddenly, the wall turned a corner inward, and as I drifted around the slight bend in the reef, the current all



Beautiful coral garden of brilliantly colored sea fans, feather stars, hard corals and sponges at Bunaken National Marine Park; Close-up of juvenile harlequin sweetlips (top left). PREVIOUS PAGE: Green sea turtle on reef




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Black saddled toby (above); Diver on wall at Bunaken National Marine Park (right); Banded coral shrimp in barrel sponge (lower right)

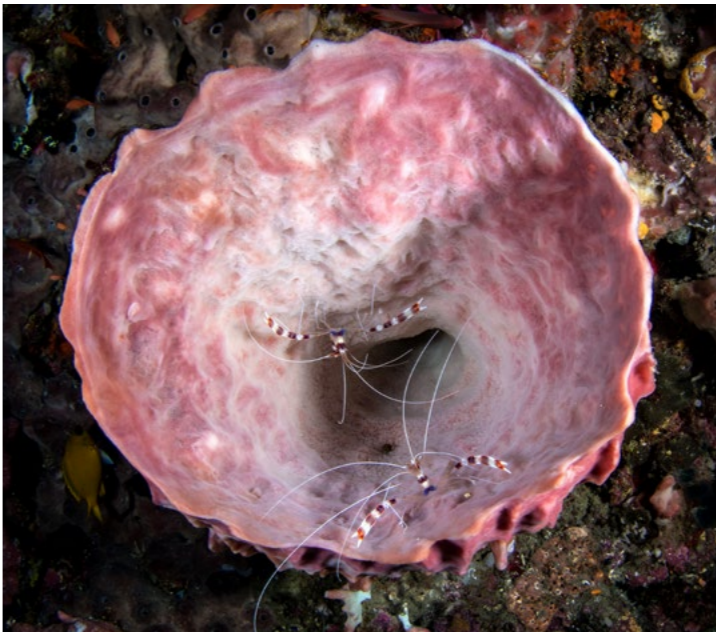
but stopped. Not moving and looking around, it felt like I was flying, and the desire to do a swan dive down into the abyss below me was tempting. It was one of those “wow” moments where I remembered I was so lucky to be here, underwater, surrounded by this beauty. As if on cue, a sea turtle emerged out of the blue, swimming right towards me, then over my head, and slowly settled on the reef for a nap.

Bunaken National Marine Park North Sulawesi is one of those exotic destinations on every diver's list. When someone asks me about the diving in the region, I find myself going on and on about the wonders of Lembeh Strait like a love-sick teenager pining for a high school crush. Lembeh Strait

is known for its extensive collection of weird and wonderful muck critters, from little known nudibranch species to frogfish galore. But I had never been diving on the western coast of Sulawesi and was in awe of what I found in Bunaken National Park.

An established marine park and reserve since 1991, Bunaken National Marine Park covers five islands and the water around them—over 75,000 hectares (346 square miles) in total. Like much of Indonesia, it falls within the Coral Triangle, which is compared to the rainforest of the ocean, containing the most biodiversity of marine life on Earth.

Species counts vary widely in the



Sea pen crab on sea pen



School of catfish with large sponge on reef (above); Tiny frogfish (top left) and juvenile orange frogfish (left) no larger than a pea

national park, but over 1,500 fish species, 70 coral species, as well as dolphins, pilot whales and even the rare dugong have been documented in the park. And there are likely more species to be recorded, given its location. The deep waters and ample ocean currents around the islands of Bunaken, Siladen,

Manado Tua, Mantehang and Nain play a role in the vast amount of marine life in the area as do the varying ecosystems, including sea-grass beds, mangroves and tropical waters.

For photographers, Bunaken offers everything one could want and more, but it does test one's

ability to answer the never-ending question of whether to shoot wide-angle or macro. The walls are covered in life, creating many picture-perfect wide-angle opportunities, with healthy corals and sponges, plenty of fish, and of course, sea turtles everywhere. But upon close inspection, the walls are teeming with tiny stuff, including leaf scorpionfish, anemones with anemonefish and clownfish, tiny frogfish, shrimp, crabs and many species of nudibranchs.

The muck diving

For those who cannot imagine diving North Sulawesi without go-

ing on a black sand treasure hunt for the marvels of muck diving, don't worry, there is plenty of that too. Along the coast of the actively volcanic North Sulawesi, black sand muck diving is abundant.

Our first muck dives were around Poopoh, and the underwater landscape was a slowly sloping sandy bottom with small patches of coral. I am always amazed by how fantastic the dive guides are in spotting tiny critters, and it was not long before my dive buddy and I had been shown to a freckled snake eel, several shrimps in bubble coral, and at least five species of nudibranchs.



Costasiella sp. nudibranch, also called Shaun the Sheep or sheep nudibranch

Hyselodoris sp. nudibranch





North Sulawesi



Freckled snake eel (above);
Ornate ghost pipefish (top
center); Soft coral cowry
(top right); Peacock mantis
shrimp (right)

Different colored anemones dotted the underwater landscape with several species of anemonefish and clownfish, as well as crabs and shrimp residents. Just before the end of one dive, our guide mimicked he was boxing underwater and then pointed into the coral to show us a brightly colored peacock mantis shrimp fully out of its burrow, walking along on the sand.

In the shallows were seagrass

beds, and we had heard about the potential to see elusive dugongs, so I tried to keep one eye on the sand, looking for tiny critters and my other out in the water column. No such luck on the dugong, but who knows, one could have gone right over my head while my attention was fully absorbed in trying to get a photo of a single skeleton shrimp on a hydroid.

Other muck dives revealed

many of my favorite muck critters, including seahorses, several species of ghost pipefish, large and small frogfish of many colors, and even a soft coral cowry the size of a lint ball, thanks again to the amazing eye of the dive guide.

Thalassa Resort

So, what is the best way to see both the stunning corals of Bunaken National Marine Park and

the muck diving of Sulawesi? Thalassa Resort is a great place to use as a base to see it all. Located on the main island and only about a 30-minute drive from the



Flabina sp. nudibranchs (above)
Skeleton shrimp (left)



North Sulawesi



Bungalows (above) and dive boat (left and below) at Thalassa Dive Resort; Local fishers, with town of Manado in background (top left); Interior of bungalow room at Thalassa (far lower left)

airport in Manado, this charming resort is set among stunning landscape, with a very cozy feel about it.

The landscaping and greenery around the resort are lovely. From the moment you enter the property, you notice the extensive amount of plant species, including plenty of brightly colored ex-

otic flowers, and unique trees such as the starfruit tree that was right outside my bungalow. The path that takes you from the restaurant and dive center to the bungalows is so dense in flora that part of the path is a tunnel of vegetation. It was fun to walk through, especially at night when soft lights lit up the pathway, casting a lovely

glow on the trees.

The bungalows are built on a hill at different levels, all having gorgeous views, some with partial ocean views, that made you feel like you were in the Indonesian jungle. Each morning, I was awakened to the songs of many birds, and each night crickets filled up the airwaves.

Definitely splurge on the sea view bungalows or cottages, all recently renovated, with spacious living areas, good air conditioning and fully stocked refrigerators so that you can enjoy a local Bintang from your private terrace while watching the sunset turn the sky orange and red. Some rooms have a bit of a blue ocean view, others overlook the beautifully

gardened grounds (go hilltop for more ocean views, although it is a workout

kids and plenty of lounge chairs for sunbathing.

The dining area is large and airy, providing a great place to enjoy conversation with other divers. There is coffee and tea available all day, a bar, and (my favorite) an ice-cream cooler with plenty

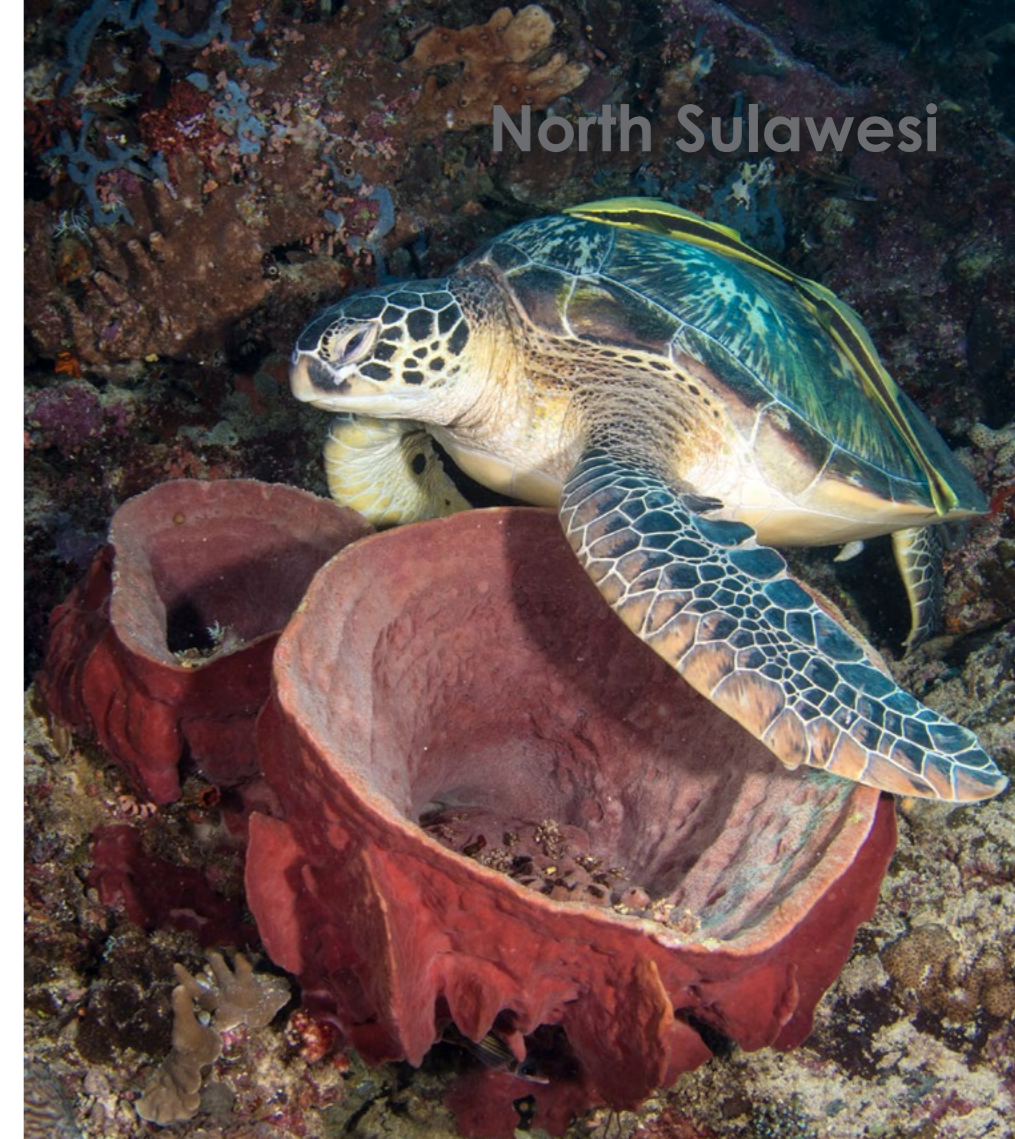
of ice-cream bar options for late-night or after-dive cravings. One night was pizza night, made to order in a wood-fired brick oven and enjoyed out on the terrace surrounding the pool and overlooking the water.

to climb all the stairs.)

The ambience of the resort exudes relaxation. There is no hustle and bustle, and stress levels of everyday life seem to melt upon arrival. On several nights, there was live music during dinner and into the evening. For those wishing to de-stress with a massage, there is a peaceful spa with windows overlooking the mangroves and water. Not to mention, you can take a nice detox from the internet (which we all probably need more than we realize), but if you cannot go without it, it is available in the restaurant for free.

Further relaxing can be done at the large pool (a favorite place to watch the sunset). There is also a small shallow pool next to it for the





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Wall dive at Bunaken National Marine Park; Porcelain crab on anemone; Tiger blenny on golden sea squirt; Green sea turtle on barrel sponges; Moray eel; Napoleon snake eel (left)



those really wanting to get the most out of their trip to North Sulawesi, Thalassa makes it easy to dive all of the famous

Diving

Thalassa Resort is a PADI 5-star resort and instructor development dive center. The staff can teach everything from a Discover Scuba dive to Instructor Development classes. In fact, the resort is one of the main places that local Indonesians go to become dive instructors, and then they go on to work at the resort or at others throughout Indonesia. The owner, Simone Gerritsen, is a PADI Course Director, and the dive center has been teaching instructors since 1996.

Diving from Thalassa could not be easier. They had flexible dive days, allowing divers to pick and choose from an 8am, 10am and 2pm dive (or all of the above) each day. Night and mandarinfish dives were available on request, and divers could enjoy unlimited dives on the house reef. The dive shop had a nice camera room with many electric outlets for charging, and was secured overnight.

Dive boats were spacious, and the crew took care of setting up and taking down gear, so all we divers had to do

was show up with our cameras, ready to go. Plenty of towels were available on the boat (as well as by the pool), and after the dive, there was hot tea and fruit.

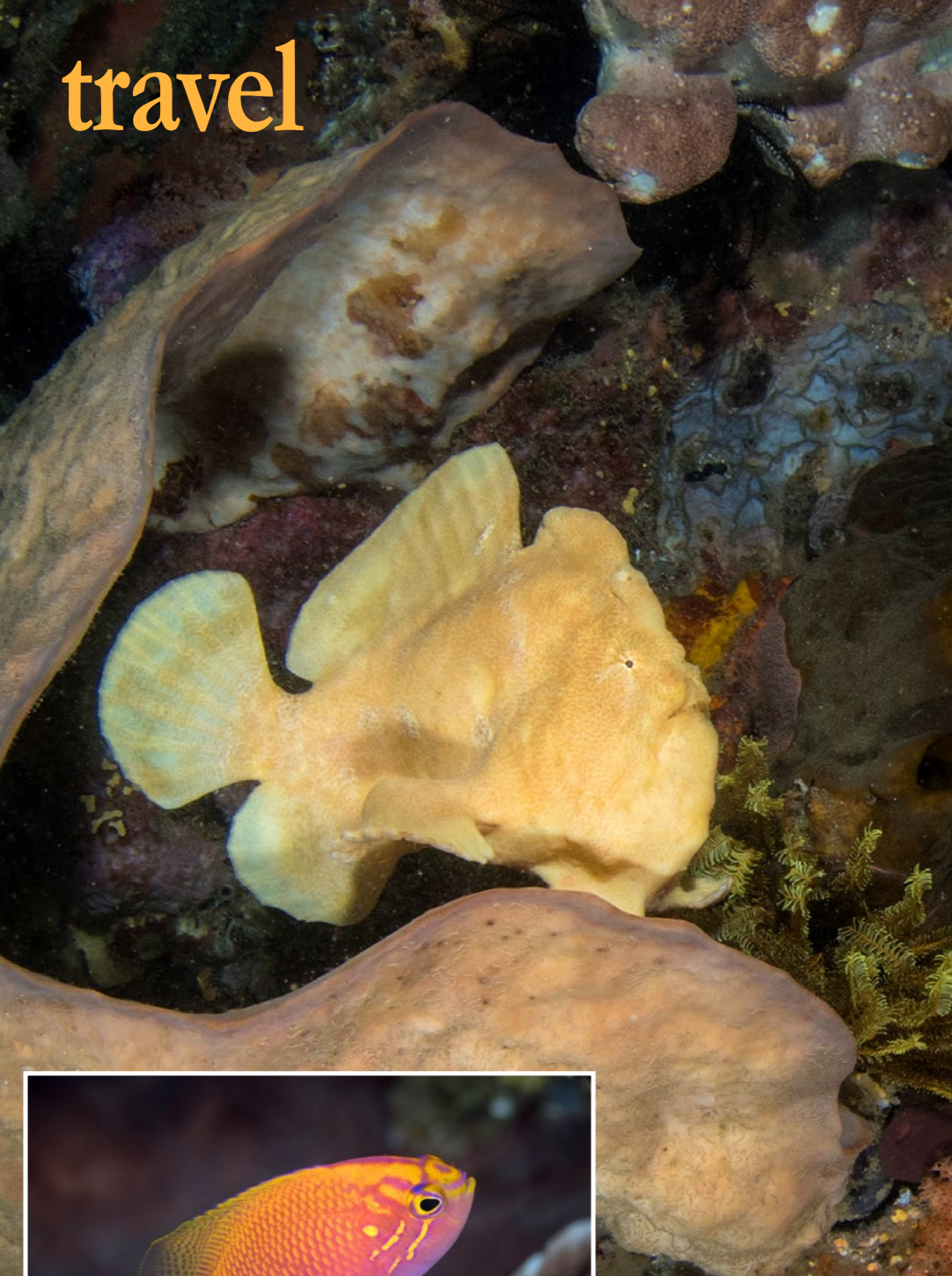
Beyond the resort

The diving around Bunaken Island is only a 20-minute boat ride from the resort and exceptional muck diving can be found on the mainland very close to the resort, both of which could keep any diver satisfied for many dives. But for



Sea cucumber crab on sea cucumber





North Sulawesi



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT. Sunburst anthia; Giant frogfish on sponge; False clownfish; Anemonefish on anemone; *Caloria indica* nudibranch; Robust ghost pipefish (above)



hours, and it was a beautiful, sunny day. The longer boat ride was enjoyable as it was neat to cruise the coastline of North Sulawesi and see the many small islands around it.

Bangka Archipelago

Sahaung Point. At Bangka, our first dive was at a site called Sahaung Point, which had many large boulders covered in soft corals. Visibility was a bit murky, but one could see on a clear day that this site would be amazingly colorful with sea fans, sponges and plenty of fish. On our second dive, we found three giant frog-

fish, one of which was yellow and swimming from sponge to sponge.

Yellow Coco. Our last dive of the day was off the mainland (but close to Bangka) at a site called Yellow Coco. It is a place where volcanic activity can be seen underwater. Sulawesi has active volcanoes and our dive guide took us to an area around 20m (65ft) where hot water was coming up from below (which felt wonderful). The hot water venting into the cold made looking through the water blurry. Not much life was around the vent, but it was very neat to experience, and

the sand around the water vent was also hot to the touch.

Whether diving close to the resort or at more far-off dive sites, the crew went out of their way to make sure guests got to dive where they wanted. On more distant dive trips, lunch was provided on board, and when the boat stayed closer to home, they would return to the resort so we could have lunch, take a quick nap and then, if desired, go back out for the third dive. Diving with Thalassa Resort made it so

easy to make the most out of a dive trip, while also relaxing and fully enjoying a dive vacation.

Tangkoko National Park

A 90-minute drive east from Thalassa takes you to Tangkoko National Park, a reserve that has been a conservation area since 1919. Famous for the possibil-



Between dives, one can enjoy an excursion to Tunan Waterfall near Manado.



Pair of cuscus (above) and a macaque (right) in Tangkoko National Park



ity of seeing tarsiers, the world's smallest primate, visitors also commonly see black crested macaques and bear cuscus. The park has documented 127 mammal species, 233 birds, and 104 reptile and amphibians, many of which are endemic to the island.

We set out to visit the park on our last full day (we could not dive because of morning flights), which made it fit perfectly into our schedule. Once at the park, a local guide and park ranger led us on our hike in hopes of viewing the big three: macaque, cuscus and tarsier. After just minutes on the path, we spotted wild pigs and our guide stopped, alerting us to the different bird calls and identifying what species they were.

I had visited the park several years ago and remembered getting to see all three with very little effort. I had not realized how lucky I was at the time, until this visit; we had been hiking for over two hours through mud, spider webs and

battling biting ants before even getting a glimpse of a monkey.

Macaques. Then, suddenly, we were surrounded by macaques. A mother carrying its baby on her back crossed the path just in front of us, and we spotted a young monkey jumping from tree to tree over our heads. The largest male (likely the alpha) sat in the middle and just looked at us while munching on some leaves. Our discomfort over the long hike was forgotten the instant we saw the monkeys and our cameras were out, snapping away.

Cuscus. After a little while, we left the macaques in peace and continued to hike. Next up in our search was the cuscus. Cuscus (sometimes spelled "kuskus" or called Sulawesi bears) are not ac-

tually bears, but arboreal marsupials endemic to Sulawesi and a few nearby islands. They have long, curled claws and prehensile tails that allow them to climb considerable heights to the tops of the trees where they live and eat leaves and flowers.



NEW RESORT: THALASSA IS NOW ON BOTH SIDES OF NORTH SULAWESI

While Thalassa Manado is located on the west coast of the northern peninsula of "Sulut," the operation's newest resort, Thalassa Lembeh, is located on Lembeh Island off the east coast of the peninsula. At Thalassa Lembeh, divers can enjoy muck diving at its best.



A multi-resort stay at Thalassa is now possible in which you can dive Bunaken National Marine Park and Bangka Archipelago at Thalassa Manado as well as the incredible, rich muck diving in Lembeh Strait at Thalassa Lembeh. The new resort on a peaceful cove with beautiful views of Lembeh Strait has nine comfortable bungalows, each with its own private terrace overlooking the sea. There is a swimming pool for both dive courses and relaxation. Cappuccinos can be enjoyed at the Sabar Lounge and Santai Restaurant, led by Chef Arifin, offers delicious meals in the Minahas tradition. Between dives, guests can enjoy a traditional massage or go on one of the excursions offered by the resort. You can explore the lush, green island of Lembeh on guided hiking trips or get a glimpse of island life with a visit to the local village. Learn more at: Thalassamanado.com/lembeh



American underwater photographer and writer Brandi Mueller is a PADI IDC Staff Instructor and boat captain. When she's not teaching scuba or driving boats, she's most happy traveling and being underwater with a camera. For more information, please visit: Brandiunderwater.com.

SOURCES:
INDONESIA-TOURISM.COM
SCIENCEFOCUS.COM

SULAWESI-INFO.COM
THALASSAMANADO.COM
WIKITRAVEL.ORG

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Lavendar kingfisher, macaque, tarsier and flying lizard in Tangkoko National Park

Our guide stopped us, his gaze directed to the tops of the trees. "Do you see that black dot in the tree?" We looked, and looked some more. I took

monkeys seem to be so ugly that they are cute. Tarsiers are nocturnal, so we had to wait until just before sunset before we might get a glimpse.

Our guide led us to the tree in which the tarsiers are usually found, and we waited. And waited. The sun had set and the sky had turned a blood orange, giving us a warning that it would be dark soon. We had to start hiking out so we would not be walking too long in the dark.

Two out of three isn't so bad, I was thinking, as we tried not to trip over tree roots or hit our heads on low branches in the dark. Then, off in the distance, we saw a light signaling us. (It was like we were on a night dive and someone was flashing their light to us to say they had found something good.) Another guide and his group had found a single tarsier on a tree while they were hiking out. We stopped for a few minutes for a glimpse

of these amazingly strange animals that are genetically our not-so-distant cousins. It was no larger than a person's hand and seemed to be all eyes and ears.

With the biting ants returning and mosquitoes swarming, we were satisfied with the brief encounter and continued our way out of the jungle, feeling quite lucky to have seen all three amazing animals of which we had hoped to catch a glimpse.

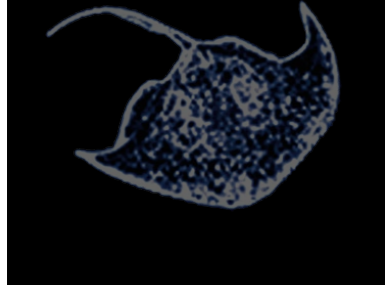
Thalassa Resort can arrange day tours to Tangkoko among other local highlights like village tours, volcano hikes, waterfalls, cooking classes and more—once again, making it an ideal place from which to explore North Sulawesi. The next day was time to depart, and after heartfelt goodbyes from the staff, it was just as their motto said, "Where guests leave as friends." ■



out my telephoto lens and aimed for the spot he described. Snapping a photo and then zooming in on the photo, there it was, an adorable cuscus looking down at us.

Tarsier. Last up was the tarsier. Said to have inspired the design of the gremlins and some even say was the inspiration for Yoda in Star Wars, these large-eyed, large-eared, large-fingered, but tiny

fact file

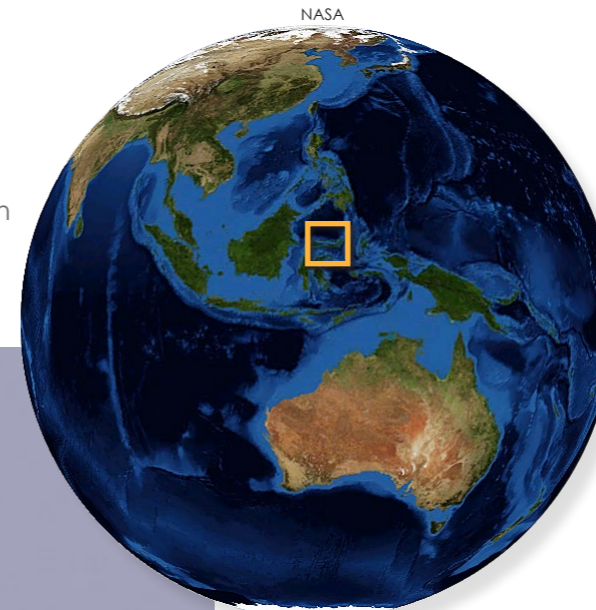


SOURCES: US CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, XE.COM, CDC.GOV, STATE.TRAVEL.US, WIKIPEDIA.ORG, INDONESIA-TOURISM.COM, SULAWESI-INFO.COM

North Sulawesi, Indonesia



Location of North Sulawesi on global map (right), and on map of Indonesia (below)



History Archeological research in caves in North Sulawesi has found evidence of human habitation dating as far back as 30,000 years ago. In the latter part of the 16th century, this land of gold, spices and rice drew the Portuguese, the Spanish and the Dutch to North Sulawesi, leading to political and military conflicts. It was also an east-west trade route, which saw the spread of Christianity, Islam and religions brought to its shores by Chinese merchants. In the 17th century, the area fell under Dutch control, whose rule spanned three centuries until WWII, when the Japanese forced out the Dutch. In 1945, the Japanese surrendered and the Dutch regained possession of the area briefly until they recognized the newly created United States of Indonesia in 1949. North Sulawesi became a territory of the State of East Indonesia, which was later dissolved and merged into the Republic of Indonesia (RIS). In 1950, the RIS was reformed into the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, in which the island of Sulawesi was governed by one province. In 1959, this province was divided into several, one of which became North Sulawesi. Government: presidential republic. Capital: Jakarta

Geography Located in Southeastern Asia, Indonesia is an archipelago situated between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It is made up of about 13,500 islands, 6,000 of which are inhabited and sit on either side of the equator. Indonesia is made up of about 13500 islands, 6000 of which are inhabited and sit on either side of the equator. Bunaken National Marine Park was established in 1991 as one of Indonesia's first marine parks. Five islands sit within the park including Bunaken, Siladen, Manado Tue, Mantehage, and Nain. Three percent of the park is land and the other 97 percent is water. Bunaken National Park is 896 sq km and has extremely deep waters and oceanic currents. Mangrove, seagrass beds, coral reef, deep water, and coastal ecosystems exist within the park. North Sulawesi is considered to be a young island (5-24 million years old) and is still actively volcanic. Coastline: 54,716km. Terrain consists primarily of coastal lowlands, with interior mountains on larger islands.

Climate North Sulawesi climate is affected by monsoon winds. November-April tend to be windy and rainy, and May-October tends to be drier. Water temperatures vary from 26-29°C (78-84°F) with January-March being the coolest. Air temperatures average 28°C (82°F) year-round. Diving occurs year round but the drier and less windy season is May-October.

Environmental issues Over half of Indonesia falls within the Coral Triangle. Rainforests cover over 57% of the land and 20% of the world's coral reefs are in Indonesian waters. Studies have shown there are over 3,000 species of fish, over 600 species of corals in the area and reef surveys have shown the Raja Ampat Islands to have the most bio diverse on Earth and the northern tip of Sulawesi having more than

70 percent of all known species to be found in the Indo-Western Pacific.

Economy A vast polyglot nation, Indonesia has experienced modest economic growth in recent years. Economic advances were made with significant financial reforms. In 2009, when the global financial crisis hit, Indonesia fared well compared to its regional neighbors. It was one of the only G20 members posting growth in 2009, alongside China and India. However, the government still faces ongoing challenges of improving the country's insufficient infrastructure, labor unrest over wages, and high oil prices affecting fuel subsidy programs.

Currency Indonesian rupiah (IDR). US dollars and Euros are often accepted in resorts and onboard liveaboards. MasterCard

and Visa are widely accepted in cities and tourist areas. Major airports and cities have ample ATMs but they can be scare (and possibly not working) on the smaller islands. Currency exchange rates will be better in large cities. Thalassa accepts credit cards, Rupia, US dollar,

and Euros. Currency exchange rates will be better in large cities. Exchange rates: 1USD=13,539 IDR; 1EUR =16,895 IDR; 1GBP=19,051 IDR; 1AUD=10,697 IDR; 1SGD=10,319 IDR

Population 260,580,739 (July 2017 est.). The island of Bali is 4.2 million as of 2014. Ethnic groups: Javanese 40.1%, Sundanese 15.5%, Malay 3.7%, Batak 3.6%, Madurese 3%, Betawi 2.9%, Minangkabau 2.7%, Buginese 2.7%, Bantenese 2%, Banjarese 1.7%, Balinese 1.7%, Acehnese 1.4%, Dayak 1.4%, Sasak 1.3%, Chinese 1.2% (2010 est.) Religions: Muslim 87.2%, Protestant 7%, Roman Catholic 2.9%, Hindu 1.7%, (2010 est.). Note: Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world. Visitors are encouraged to respect local tradition and dress modestly. Internet users: 65,525,226 (2016 est.)

Language Bahasa Indonesian is the official language with over 700 regional languages on different islands. English is often spoken in tourist areas including resorts and liveaboards. German, Spanish, and Russian are also common in the tourist areas. Thalassa Resort's staff is fluent in English, Dutch, and German.

Health Mosquito-borne illnesses are a problem and there are cases of malaria, dengue, Zika, and other. Avoid mosquito bites by using mosquito repellent and covering up during times when mosquitos are out. Water and food-borne illness can also be a problem so be sure to drink only bottled or filtered water and that food is cooked thoroughly.

Decompression chamber There is a hyperbaric chamber in Manado.

Travel/Visa Indonesia's visas requirements are ever changing so check with your countries State Department before traveling. Currently there is no visa required for tourists for up to 30 days. Passport must be valid for six months beyond expected stay.

Security Indonesia has had recent incidences of terrorism and travelers should be aware of their surroundings, avoid public demonstrations, and be cautious or avoid traveling at night. Petty crime is a problem especially in cities and credit card and ATM fraud are on the rise. Use only reputable and marked taxis preferably arranged by hotels or shopping centers.

Web sites Indonesia Tourism www.indonesia.travel