

Text and photos by Scott Bennett

Utila Island

Jewel of Honduras





Utila

“If you’ve been to South East Asia, don’t bother with the Caribbean” is a phrase I’ve encountered many times over the last decade. Having done virtually all of my diving in Asia-Pacific, the region’s legendary diversity tends to leave one a tad spoilt. When you’ve dived exclusively in the world’s biodiversity hotspot, it’s all-too-easy to assume that other areas will suffer by comparison. However, when an opportunity arose to visit the island of Utila in Honduras, I was immediately intrigued.

As well as being a totally new part of the world (in my own hemisphere for a change), it was also reasonably close, with a mere two hours time difference. I decided to cast all preconceptions aside and enjoy the diving for what it was. I ended up being in for a pleasant surprise!

Getting there proved somewhat easier than anticipated. I discovered a non-stop service to Roatan from my

home in Toronto on Sunwing, a charter airline that just started flights this past winter. Better still was the fact I could avoid the long stopovers required by connecting flights travelling through the United States.

Four and a half hours after departing cold and drizzly Toronto, I landed at Roatan’s compact international airport. After breezing through customs, I gathered my gear and

I headed outside the terminal. A 20-minute taxi ride delivered me to the West End, one of the main tourist areas on the island. From here, I caught Captain Vern’s catamaran for the four-hour trip to Utila. I was somewhat surprised by the nationalities of the passengers—virtually all of them were fellow Canadians. Then Captain Vern uttered something rather ominous, “It’s going to be rough out there today, so

Detail of fan coral on the reef at Utila (left); School of Bermuda chub (above); Juvenile spotted drumfish hovers over coral (previous page)



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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Swimming pool at the Mango Inn; Utila ferry; Street scene in Utila; Pelican at the pier; ATV's and tourists populate downtown Utila

the north Honduras coast, the Bay Islands consist of eight islands and more than 60 cays. In contrast to the more rolling terrain of Roatan, Utila is quite flat, with the notable exception being the rounded summit of Pumpkin Hill.

eclectic assortment of electric golf carts, ATV's and most surprisingly, Thai-style tuk-tuks. It became immediately apparent that diving is prominently woven into the island cultural fabric, with more "diver

The island

Traditionally, Utila was largely a fishing community with the initial settlements to be found on the Utila Cayes, 11 palm-fringed islands off the southwest coast. Only 13km long and 5km wide with much of the coastline dominated by mangroves, the island is virtually uninhabited except for the small fishing village of East Harbour (Utila Town). Due to 300 years of British influence, the main language of the island's 6000 inhabitants is English, whereas mainland Honduras speaks Spanish.

In contrast to Roatan's more mainstream tourist scene, Utila is decidedly more charming, boasting a laid-back Caribbean vibe. Gingerbread houses awash in a range of pastel hues lined the main road, while traffic consisted of an



down" flags draped from buildings and flagpoles than actual Honduran flags!

After checking in at the Utila Dive Centre (UDC), I was driven to my home for the week, the Mango Inn. Nestled amidst luxuriant tropical gardens buzzing with hummingbirds, the resort was situated in a quiet residential area of town, but only a 5-minute stroll from the all the amenities and restaurants on the main street.

Later in the evening, I met up with Andy Phillips, UDC's course director. Over a delicious pizza and a few Salva Vida beers at the Mango Inn, Andy gave me

I hope everybody has taken their sea-sick pills." Scanning the waters ahead, I could see a profusion of whitecaps. Yikes!

Within 15 minutes of departure, the vessel started heaving, and so did the passengers. (A word of warning: a lack of sleep, copious amounts of beer and rough seas do

NOT mix!) I speedily shifted to the non-vomiting side of the boat and tried to enjoy the rest of the trip. Fortunately, my stomach contents remained intact. When all was said and done, the trip took an hour longer than expected, and we finally arrived in Utila around 5:00PM. Situated approximately 65km off





a run-down on the island's diving.

Utila's waters are home to over 100 charted dive sites with a variety of environments. Suspended on the rim of the continental shelf, Utila's north side is flanked by submarine walls that plummet to over 1,000m. The drop offs are also home to the island's

most famous resident, the whale shark. The peak season for these gentle giants is between March-April and August-September. As my arrival had coincided with the former, my fingers were crossed!

I also asked Andy about the political events of 2009. While widely reported by the international media as a coup, the local version was somewhat different, with the removal of former president Zelaya being entirely within the rights of the constitution. As is typical in politics, some agreed and some didn't, and demonstrations did take place. As a result, the U.S. State Department slapped a travel advisory on the country and tourism virtually dried up overnight. Utila and Roatan were hit especially hard, as tourism is the foremost component of the local economy.

Despite a few incidents of unrest on the mainland, the Bay Islands remained trouble-free during the entire

Hummingbird build their snug nests out of local materials



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Vase sponge; Mango Inn bungalow; Cozy room at the Mango Inn



Utila

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Pederson's cleaner shrimp (left); Utila Beach; Brown garden eel; Four-eye butterflyfish; Longspine squirrelfish

episode. After elections were held in November, a new president was instated and by December, the travel advisory was revoked. Happily for the locals, tourism has since bounded back.

The diving

The next morning, I arrived at the dive shop in plenty of time for the 8:00AM departure. It was a full boat, with 14 divers including guides Tyson (a fellow Torontonion) and Josiah. After a recent liveaboard trip in the Philippines where all you had to do was stick out your foot and someone would put a fin on it, I quickly realized

that the UDC was a do-it-yourself type of operation, with everyone responsible for setting up their own gear. It had been so long since I've done so that it was downright embarrassing!

Spotted Bay

Our destination was Spotted Bay, situated off the island's northwest coast. Just getting there proved to be an adventure, as the previous day's rollicking seas had not

yet subsided and the half-hour trip was decidedly rough.

After tying up at the mooring line, it was a real production to get everyone geared up and into the water. Tyson was assigned to be my dive buddy, and we opted to wait until everyone else was in first. After being helped to the rear of the wildly heaving boat, I did a giant stride and entered the water.

Despite the extreme surface chop, the visibility was surprisingly good. Descending to the sandy channel below, I got my first look at the reef and was immediately struck by how different it looked. While not boasting the sheer number of corals I'd seen in Asia, the growth was extraordinarily lush. A delirious array soft corals and sponges blanketed the reef, while fan corals were absolutely everywhere, their fronds undulating rhythmically in the strong surge.

Virtually everything in sight was totally new, especially the fish. Although I recognized angelfish, butterflyfish and squirrelfish, the species were unfamiliar. Squirrelfish looked virtually identical to their Pacific cousins, but boasted an impressive dorsal fin when the fish became agitated. Parrotfish were especially abundant and there appeared to be many different varieties (an incorrect assumption, but more on that later). I knew

I would be spending some serious time with the fish ID book back at the dive centre.

After an enjoyable 50 minutes, we surfaced to discover a steady rain had



fast enough! Moving back to the more protected waters of the island's south side, our next stop was Little Bight.

Little Bight

Here, a coral-shrouded wall descended 18m to a large expanse of white sand, which was home to large congregations of

garden eels. Sitting in front of what appeared to be a small anemone was an exquisite shrimp. Sporting a pair of long white antennae, its transparent body was accented with an assembly of vibrant purple spots. I later discovered it to be a Pederson's cleaner shrimp, a commonly observed Caribbean species.

commenced. Getting on board proved to be a real challenge as the wooden ladder bobbed madly in the turbulent waters. Due to the surface conditions and strong surge, over half the group had opted to sit the next dive out.

As I sat cold and shivering in the rain, the surface interval couldn't end





A fan coral boasted a trio of small but conspicuous molluscs called flamingo tongues, their creamy shells garbed in a psychedelic wardrobe of orange spots encircled with black. Although the corals have developed toxins to deter predators, these molluscs

have developed a unique strategy to consume their favourite food. Over time, they have evolved a group of genes and proteins called a “defensome” that detoxifies coral compounds.

While scouring the white sandy bottom for additional macro subjects, I was

immediately assailed with a frenetic bout of tank banging. Whirling in all directions, I failed to see the cause of the commotion. That is, until I glanced above my right shoulder—hovering in the water column less than a metre away was a great barracuda! I quickly shifted my position and fired off a series of exposures. Best of all, I was able to capture a few images with a vibrant blue background.

Ted’s Point

Still game for more, I headed out on in the afternoon with dive guide, Jeremy, to explore Ted’s Point. The fish life was rife, attracted by a pair strong converging currents that sweep past.

At the eastern end, the wall drops sharply to below 40m, while to the west, a gentle slope lies at 18m. The sandy areas were dotted with coral bommies decorated with sea fans, soft corals and sponges. Feather duster worms were congregated in large clusters, unlike the solitary individuals I’d routinely encountered in Asia.

On the sandy bottom at 20m, a small wreck lay tilted on its side, soft corals

protruding from the underside of its bow like feathery goatee. At our safety stop, we came across a school of large silvery fish, which Jeremy couldn’t identify. They weren’t even in the reef guide; in fact no one seemed to know what they were. After doing some research back home, I discovered them to be Bermuda chub.

Topside

Just like its undersea environs, Utila’s topside residents are a diverse lot. An eclectic mix of Spanish, African and English heritage, combined with an assortment of expats from around

some money exchanged, so I was steered me towards Archie Henderson’s place on the main street near the crossroads. Surprisingly, Archie was no Brit, but thoroughly Spanish!

There was definitely no shortage of local characters. One afternoon, I saw

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LEFT TO RIGHT: Fan corals at Ted’s Point; Sunset in Utila; Young boy shows no fear handling a tarantuala local to the area; ATV serves as the family car in these parts



the world creates a rich cultural mosaic that is downright intoxicating. Interestingly, a number of people with English names are actually Spanish, a result of the island’s 300 years of British control.

One night, I needed to get





one fellow speeding by the dive shop with a large scarlet macaw sitting on his shoulder. As a result of this extraordinary cultural mélange, Utila's residents boast a wealth of stories.

One evening, I ventured out to a Mexican restaurant called El Picante, which was situated adjacent to the crossroads on the main drag. The owner, Jean hailed from the Congo of all places. "How on earth did you end up in Honduras?" I queried. "A woman," he responded with a broad grin. His Honduran wife, Theresa, was also the cook, and she served up some of the best enchiladas that I've ever eaten. The drinks menu also offered a rather intriguing concoction called a "Chimpanzee". When Jean told me the contents included dark rum, coconut milk, bananas, cinnamon and crushed ice, I was sold on the spot. It did boast a kick, so I opted to stop at one. A few more and I'd probably be swinging from the treetops like its namesake!

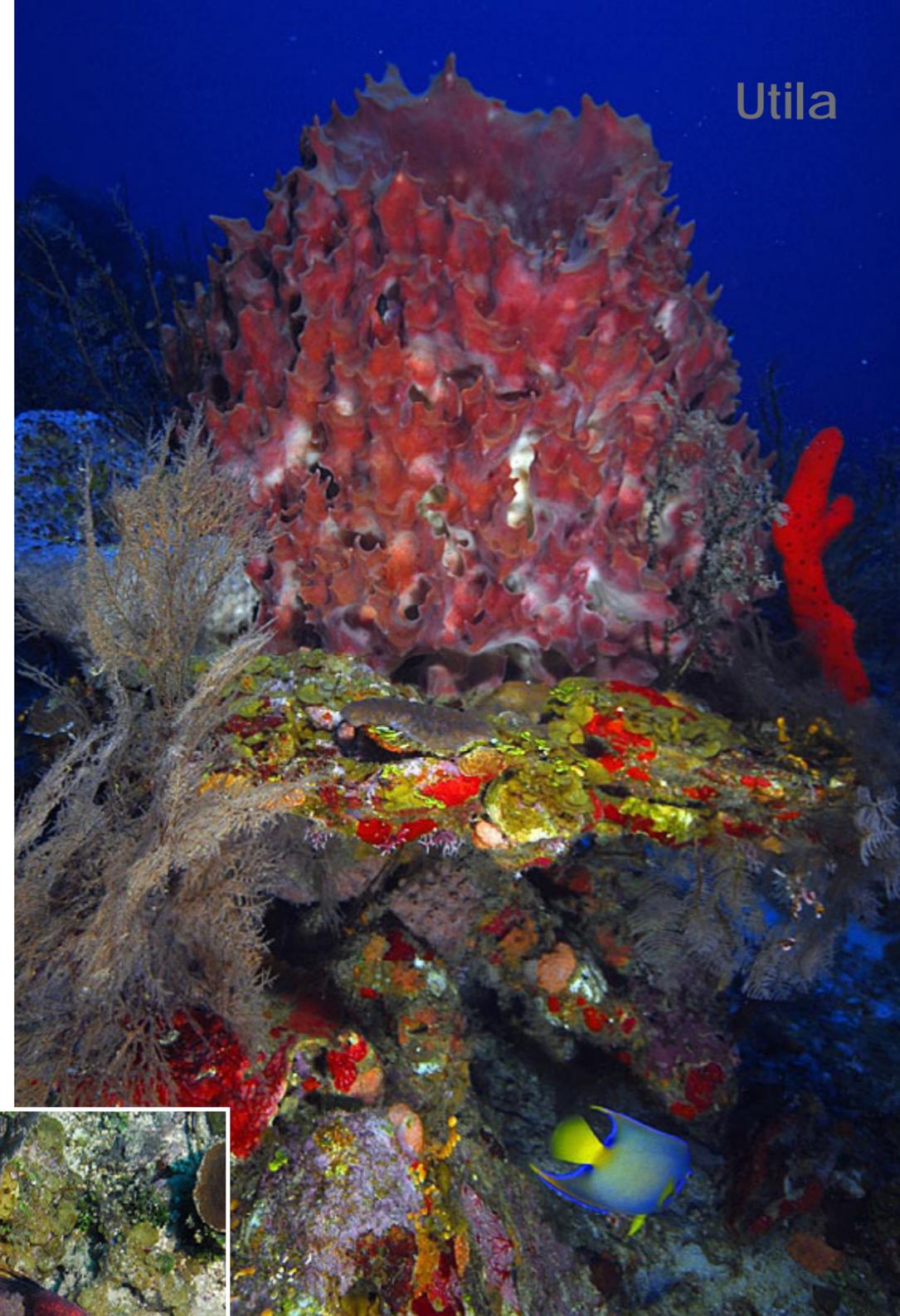
More diving

The remainder of the week followed a similar routine, with morning dives on the north shore followed by afternoons on the south.

CJ's Drop-Off

In contrast to the south side's gentler slopes, CJ's Drop-Off boasted dizzying walls plummeting to 1,000m. An assembly of triggerfish called black durgens were on hand to greet us, as we descended 5m to the reef top. Hovering over the rim as it plunged into the abyssal depths below was truly exhilarating.

While descending the wall, frequent computer checks were absolutely essential, as the crystal clear visibility would make it all too easy to exceed recreational diving limits at the drop of a hat. Back on the boat, Ryan, my guide, reckoned it was the best visibility



he'd seen on the island in weeks.

Big Rock

After the deeper dives of the morning, the day's final dive at Big Rock was kept decidedly shallower. Within moments, Ryan gestured to nearby coral,

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Barred hamlet; Diver at CJ's Drop-Off; Feather duster worms; Barrel sponge at Pumpkin Hill Banks; Hogfish (inset)





nose puffers and one seriously large dog snapper vying for my camera's attention.

UDC Jetty

For macro subjects, I discovered one needn't look any further than the Utila Dive Center jetty, whose wooden pilings are a favourite haunt of seahorses. One day, with a few hours to spare between dives, I grabbed my camera, donned some fins and snorkel and set out in search of them.

Although I did find a couple of banded coral shrimp and a school of grunts, my seahorse search came up empty-handed—that is, until I asked one of the dive instructors above, who informed me there was one attached to a rope right at the end of the jetty. Having a second look, I sheepishly realized it had been right in front of my nose during my initial forage. The experience ended up being a real first: underwater macro photography while snorkelling.

Black Hills

A firm favourite amongst many visitors, Black Hills is considered to be one of the Bay Islands' premier dive sites. An isolated seamount, its nutrient-rich waters attract fish like a magnet. It's summit, starting at a depth of 10m, was shrouded



with a patchwork of fan corals, sponges and hard corals. Swirling amongst them were successions of blue tang. French grunts, yellowtail snappers and the occasional grey angelfish. During the dive brief, we were told a large green moray could often be seen patrolling the reef top, and sure enough he (she?) appeared right on cue.

Above the reef, a shimmering school of horse-eye jacks glinted in the blue, joined by several Atlantic spadefish and a school of southern sennet, a species of barracuda. The duration of the dive was spent encircling the seamount's perimeter, and every pass revealed something new. While photographing a fan coral, a large hogfish appeared from beneath one of the fronds. A large wrasse named after the shape of the male's head, they are also highly valued for their meat (which does not taste like pork).

Duppy Waters

For our next dive, we headed over to the north



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CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Dive boat hovers over reef at Duppy Waters; Secretary blenny; Seahorse; Decorated nudibranch (sea slug); Dog snapper

where I barely discerned a diminutive head poking out of a hole. Barely the size of a pencil eraser, its owner was a secretary blenny. Photographing the tiny creature proved especially challenging, as it was difficult enough just SEEING it through my camera's viewfinder!

While a compliant subject, the difficulty of focusing on such a small fish coupled with the incessant surge present made for moments of extreme frustration. Photo subjects abounded for the remainder of the dive, with Pederson's shrimp, arrow crabs neon gobies, sharp-



where these corals can be observed at such shallow depths. Descending the wall, I came across one of Utila's smaller but most spectacular residents. Flitting above a rich tableau of table corals was a juvenile spotted drum. Attired in

plenty of other fish on view including schoolmasters, honeycomb cowfish, blueheads, Creole wrasse, porkfish and groupers.

During our surface interval, we had lunch at a charming seaside restaurant called The Purple Pelican. Sitting astride a white palm fringed beach offering expansive views to

side to Duppy Waters. 'Duppy' translates to 'ghost' in the local dialect, and the site receives its name from the light shimmering over the reef. Legend has it that if anyone sees a flash of light, his or her days are numbered. While no ghosts made an appearance, the reef was wondrous to behold, with exuberant coral growth at each and every turn.

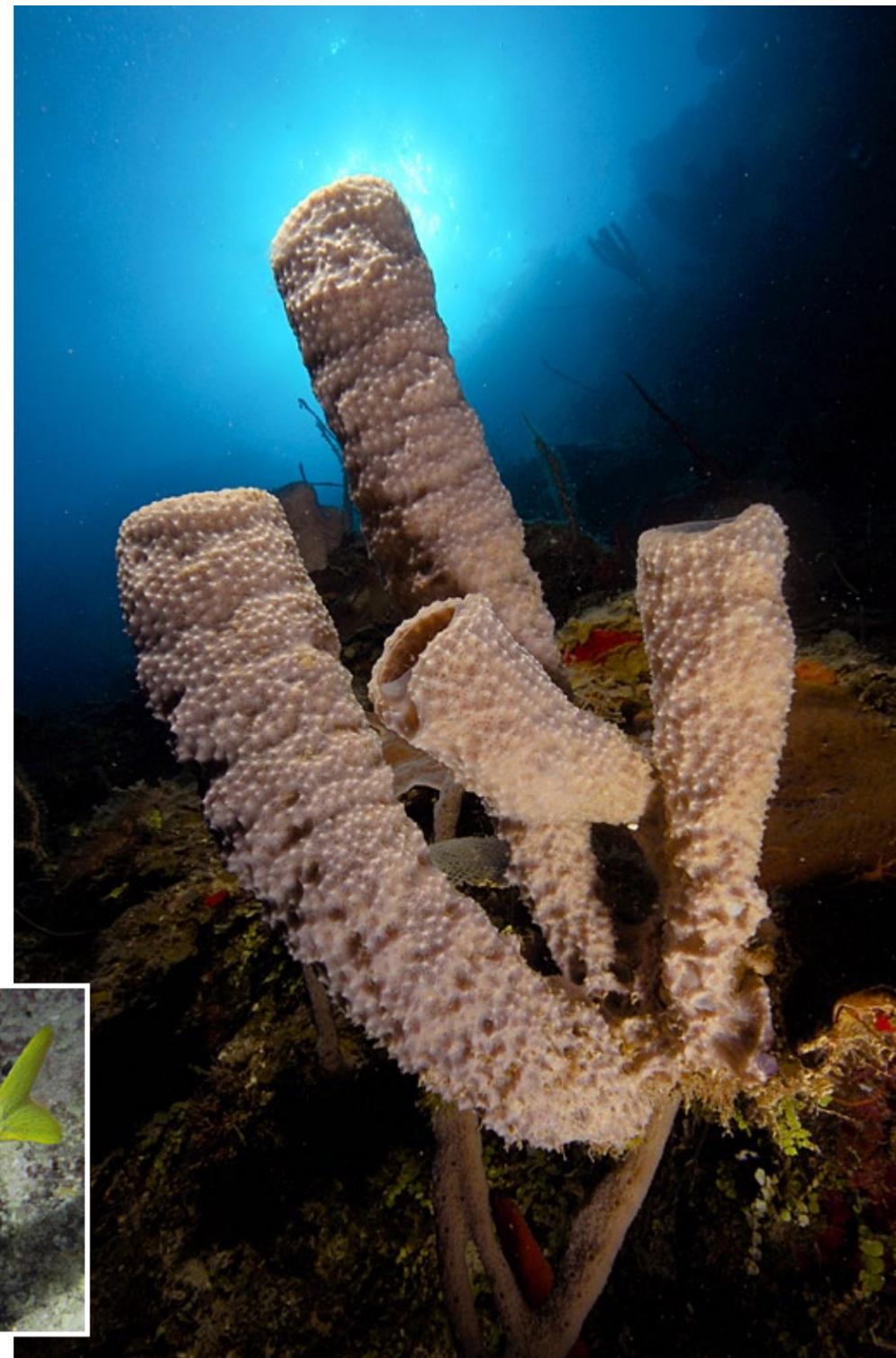
the nearby Cays, it even had a pelican (albeit not purple) perched out front on a wooden pylon

Afterwards, we paid a visit to Black Coral Wall.

Black Coral Wall

The site was aptly named, as the walls were home to a profusion of young black coral trees. In fact, it is reputed to be one of the few places in the world

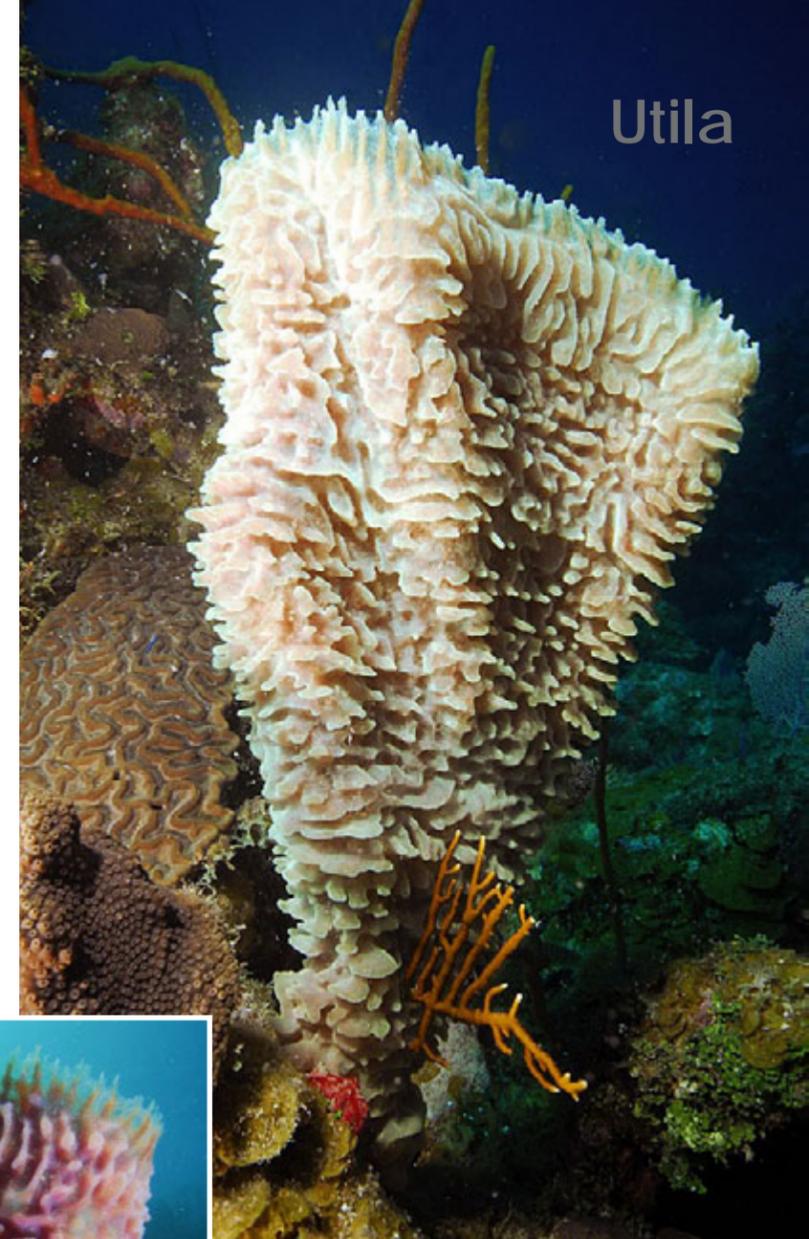
After swimming through a meandering canyon hewn into the reef top, we emerged at a precipitous wall. The waters beyond were hued in the most incredible shade of blue I've ever seen, with visibility easily surpassing 30m. While no whale sharks made an appearance, there were



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Reef scene from Duppy Waters; Lizardfish; Nassau Grouper; Branching vase sponge at Black Coral Wall; French grunt; Tobaccofish



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Pillar corals at Black Coral Wall; School of sennet, a species of barracuda; White vase coral and pink vase coral at Black Coral Wall



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a striking wardrobe of black and white accented by an elegant sinuous dorsal fin, it flitted incessantly above the corals, seemingly oblivious to my presence.

Especially captivating were the myriad of sponges on display. Boasting a wild array of shapes, sizes and colours, they soon became one of my favourite photo subjects. One species, however, was like nothing I've seen before. Standing erect like inverted bugles, vase sponges were garbed in a rich palette ranging from cream to vivid fuchsia. Dominating the reef top was an immense pillar coral. Resembling the ramparts of a submarine medieval castle, the towering spires attracted swarms of Bermuda chub, Atlantic spadefish and a couple of hefty drum fish. I ended up doing this dive several times during my stay. Each visit revealed new surprises, with the undisputed highlight being a pair of spotted eagle rays gracefully swimming side by side.

Iguana excursion

One afternoon, I took a break from diving and hopped on a tuk-tuk for a visit to the Iguana Research and Breeding Station (IRBS) on the outskirts of town. Under the guidance of biologist Helder Perez, the project is part of

The Bay Islands Foundation, a private non-profit organization committed to the protection of the country's endangered flora and



fauna through a series of conservation projects.

The IRBS was born in 1997 with the main purpose of protecting and preserving the spiny-tailed iguana, a species endemic to Utila. Known locally as swampers, the iguanas are threatened with extinction due to illegal hunting, uncontrolled development and destruction of their mangrove forest habitat.

The foundation receives volunteers interested in doing scientific research of the island's biology and ecology as well as in participating in the conservation projects for iguanas. Helder then took me on a tour of the centre, which featured a number of informative displays



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Iguana at mealtime; Stoplight parrotfish; Red shrimp; Banded coral shrimp; Juvenile swamper

on the island's ecology. Despite its compact size, Utila is home to a remarkable number of species, with new discoveries being made all the time. One room housed a large cabinet containing a series of incubators, where the iguana eggs are kept prior to hatching. To date, 750 hatchlings have been released in the wild.

Afterwards, we went outside to a series of enclosures, where

termites with wild abandon. Nearby, another enclosure contained a pair of fully-grown breeding adults as well as a large green iguana that was missing its left forelimb.

It was also feeding time for a highland iguana, the third of the island's iguana species. The meal consisted of an odd pairing of fiddler crabs and hibiscus flowers, which the hungry lizard greedily gulped down with gusto.

Perched beside the enclosure door was another island resident, a formidable looking Honduran tarantula. The centre's volunteers wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole, but a small boy gleefully plucked the large arachnid from its perch!

Night dive

After rushing back to the dive centre, I was fortunate to join a group of dive-masters for a night dive. Our destination was Silver Gardens, a short boat away. I couldn't wait to see what macro treasures Utila's waters would reveal at night. Frank, my dive guide, soon proved adept at finding critters and my camera's shutter clicked away happily for the ensuing 50 minutes.

Shrimp were everywhere, their beady eyes glowing red in my strobes'





Parrotfish at night (left)
Red nudibranch (bottom left)
Spotted scorpionfish at night (below)

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a noise that I first took to be our boatman revving the engine in a series uniform of bursts. Confusingly, it seemed to grow louder and then softer again for no apparent reason. Then, at one point it got REALLY loud. In fact, the sound became so intense I could feel the vibration right down to my very bones! Nearby, I could see Frank diligently searching for something underneath a rocky overhang.

Then, I remembered a conversation from the previous day, and a light went off in my head. It had to be a toadfish! With their broad and flat heads sporting barbels, spiny cheek protrusions and enormous mouths brimming with scores of sharp teeth, these sluggish bottom dwelling fish are more often heard than seen. It certainly was the

case that evening, as the elusive creature retreated into to a dark recess before I was able to catch a glimpse of it.

Still, the dive had one more surprise in store. Just as we were approaching the ladder, a Caribbean reef octopus regarded us suspiciously from the reef top before vanishing under some corals.

While consulting the reef guide back at the resort, I made a surprising discovery. It seems that two of the parrotfish species I had been observing all week was, in fact, one. The stoplight parrotfish undergoes a dramatic colour metamorphosis as it reaches adulthood. Juveniles are light grey in colour with a lattice pattern of chocolate brown punctuated



spotting lights. A couple of familiar faces even showed up: a pair of banded coral shrimp. I even spotted a large bright-red nudibranch, a rarity in Caribbean waters. Although resembling a Spanish dancer, Frank said it was another species entirely.

The sandy area between bommies was crawling with spotted goatfish, while a foraging blue conger eel was an unexpected surprise. In some plac-

es there was almost a bit TOO much life, as the water was literally seething with masses of wriggling red worms. For some reason, they seemed to be utterly entranced by the spotting lights of my underwater strobes, more so than everyone else's torches.

I also had a close encounter with one of the Caribbean's most unusual residents, not visually but audibly. Early into the dive, I kept hearing faint

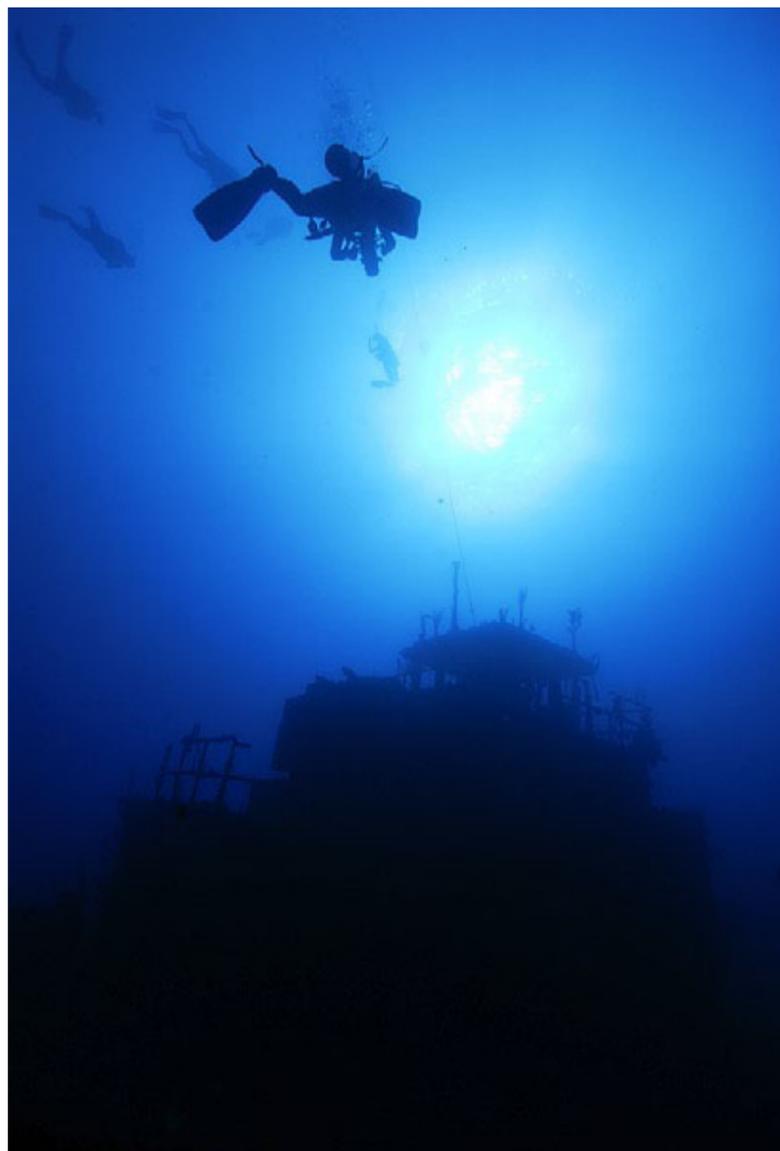
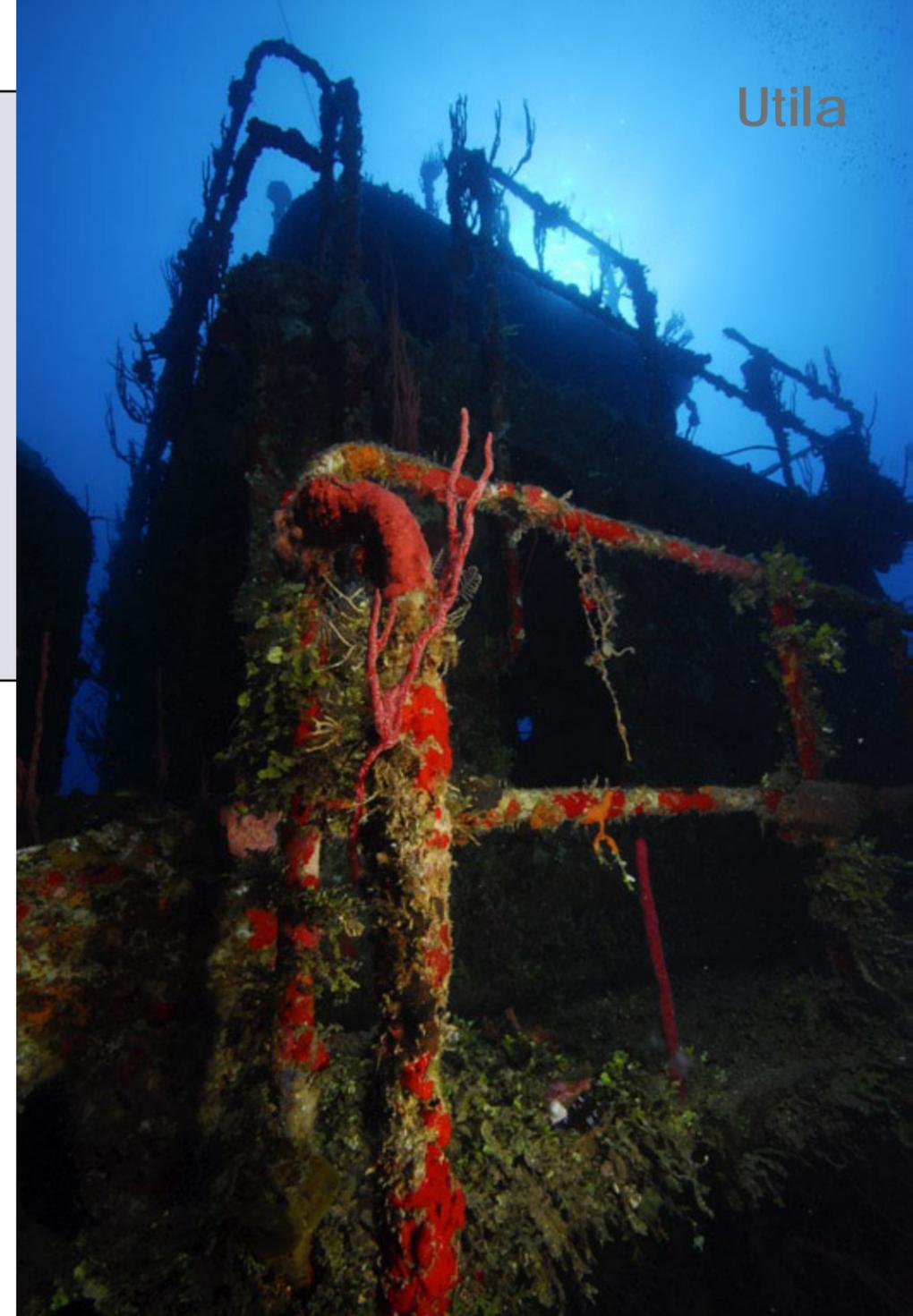


Lionfish

The poster said it all, "Wanted: Dead or alive." Emblazoned underneath the bold type was

a large image of a lionfish, Utila's newest and most unwelcome arrival. Since its first appearance in Utila's waters in the middle of 2009, the local community has declared all-out war on this destructive interloper. Just how they arrived is open to a good deal

of debate. One version theorizes that several escaped from an overturned aquarium when Hurricane Andrew slammed into Florida in the 1990s. Others put the blame on Hurricane Katrina. Whatever the reason, lionfish are now firmly entrenched in Caribbean waters with the potential of wreaking environmental havoc on local ecosystems. In their natural home in the Pacific, lionfish breed only once a year, but in the Caribbean, it has been discovered that they breed five times a year. To combat this potentially catastrophic problem, a vigorous eradication programme has been implemented to rid Utila's waters of this uninvited menace. ■



vessel sits upright on a flat, sandy bottom at a depth of 30m. An inter-island supply vessel, it was deliberately sunk in 1998 by the Utila Dive Operators Association to create an artificial reef. Descending the mooring line into the blue, the ghostly outline of the ship soon became visible. This was one seriously big wreck! Stretching 30m from bow to stern, I could already see the dive time wasn't going to be nearly long enough. Although it's possible to penetrate the cargo hold, I decided to concentrate on the exterior. On the sand below was a decidedly unusual sight: the skeleton of a pilot whale. Nearby, a corroded bicycle tire played home to a lizardfish and arrow crab while a large spiny lobster peered out from an opening at the vessel's base.

Near the bow, an H-bitt for securing mooring lines was enveloped with red star encrusting sponges and capped with a pore rope sponge, looking like an oversize stick of dynamite. As fairy basslets and queen angelfish flitted past, a peculiar jumble of objects caught my attention. On the vessel's uppermost section,

a number of items had been adhered to the railing ranging from a mannequin's head with mask to a PADI card. I later discovered that some divers like to leave personal mementos behind. While everyone doesn't approve of this practice, it has nevertheless become something of a tradition. On a decidedly smaller

by a vivid crimson belly. Adult males are blue-green accented with pink. In most parrotfish, individuals start out as females and change to males. Adding to the confusion is that some spotlight parrotfish develop directly to males from the get go. These individuals often resemble the initial phase, and often display a different

mating strategy than the terminal phase males of the same species. The verdict? Mass confusion all around!

The Haliburton Wreck
One of the week's highlights was a dive on Utila's biggest and most famous wreck, the *Haliburton*. Situated off the island's south coast less than ten minutes from town, the



scale, Ron's Wreck is also a lot shallower, lying at a depth of 14m. Since it sank in 1991, the vessel has been colonized

by a veritable tangle of sponges and corals and is home to Christmas tree worms, shrimp and lobsters. The



abundant fish life included blue chromis, Spanish hogfish, four-eye butterflyfish, tobaccofish, barred hamlets and a school of blue tang.

Venturing along the wall towards Ted's Point yielded a few more surprises. Hovering beside a fan coral was a massive yet tolerant Nassau grouper. Unfortunately, I was equipped for macro, so I had to content myself with some facial portraits. A small canyon jutting off the main wall proved to be a real bonanza. After firing off a few images of an arrow crab, I practically bumped into a spiny lobster. A scant metre from that was a massive red crab followed by an adult spotted drum. At nearby Moon Hole, I spotted a gorgeous flatworm flecked with orange spots, something I hadn't encountered during my entire visit.

Jade Seahorse

Before I knew it, the week was rapidly drawing to a close. However, there was one more land-based attraction that I was told I simply couldn't miss. All week I'd been hearing about a place called the Jade Seahorse, which was barely a minute's walk from my hotel. Comprised of a restaurant, cabins and bar, the somewhat unassuming exterior bore no portent as to the marvels that lay inside. As I entered through the main gate to the garden, I literally stopped dead in my tracks. Before me lay a whimsical setting straight out of Alice's Wonderland.

Over a number of years, the owner has lovingly crafted his verdant property into marine-themed fantasyland of glazed tile, bottles and glass. An unbridled assortment of platforms, gazebos, bridges and pathways were swathed with incredible mosaics jam-packed

THIS PAGE: Scenes from the Jade Seahorse garden created by the owner out of glass, bottles, tiles, ceramic plates and other found objects

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with detail. Overlooking the proceedings was the Treetanic Bar, a ship wrecked in the branches of a trio of mango trees towering over the front yard. There was even a hotel called Nightland, consisting of several private cabins. The detail was astonishing, and the hour I spent wandering the grounds was not nearly long enough. Definitely worth a return visit.

Pumpkin Hill

On my last diving day, Andy had a very special dive in mind. Like an undersea version of Pumpkin Hill, the Pumpkin Hill Banks is a large and round-topped seamount situated off the island's southeast coast. It was also deep, with the top lying



Utila Centre for Marine Ecology

Established in 2006, The Utila Centre for Marine Ecology's aim is to improve the welfare and economic growth of Utila by supporting the management and sustainable use of its marine biodiversity. With its unique location and variety of marine habitats, Utila is an ideal centre for ecological research. In addition, the island provides an interesting development model as the community shifts from strong historical links with fishing to its current reliance on reef based tourism.

Currently, Utila's dive industry supports up to 85 percent of the island economy. While global coral reefs face increasing threats, major bleaching events in recent years have hit Caribbean reefs especially hard. The project's goal is to identify and reduce local stressors to coral reefs, to make them more resilient to global environmental changes and will achieve this by integrating targeted research, with ongoing monitoring and community management.

The UCME has grown rapidly to become a focal point for the investigation of tropical marine and island

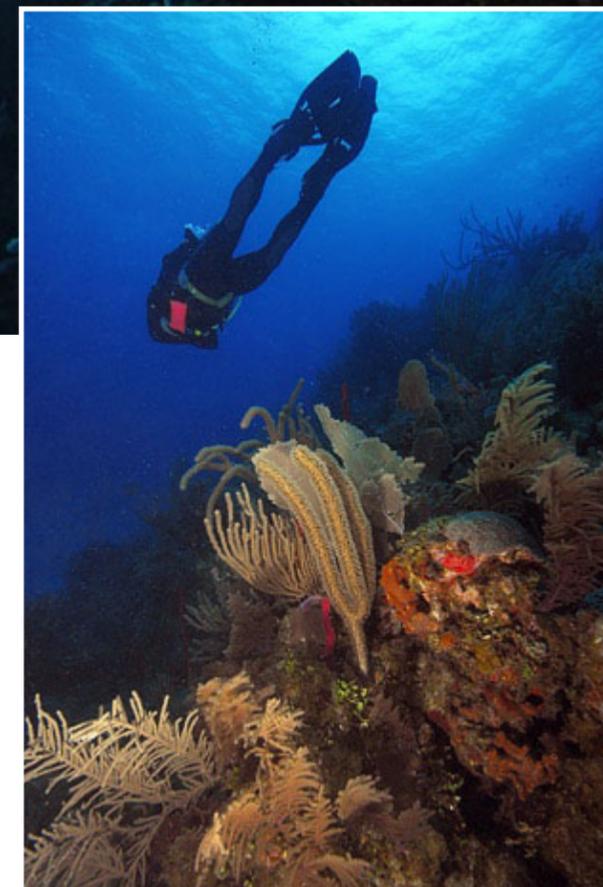
biodiversity and now provides technical capacity in marine research to the Honduran government. Research focuses on identifying and studying factors that create, maintain and influence the islands biodiversity, providing information, which can guide management decisions and underpin effective conservation. Combining cutting edge marine science with volunteer programmes and educational courses, divers and non-divers alike can assist national and international researchers as they study the island's wealth of biodiversity.

A variety of projects are currently underway, including the establishment of a locally managed conch farm, studies on assessing the extent and health of the mangrove systems, lionfish eradication and studies monitoring local fish populations. The local community is highly supportive of the centre's efforts and is actively integrated into the various research studies, working side by side with marine biologists and conservation specialists to better understand and conserve Utila's threatened marine environment. ■

at a depth of 32m. Swept by strong currents that bring in the nutrients, local fishermen have long known the spot to be a prime fishing ground.

Our group was small, with only myself, two ladies from New York, Andy and Frank. With two of the island's most experienced diversmasters on hand, I knew we were in good hands. I asked Andy if Captain Anthony

needed GPS to pinpoint the exact location. "Not necessary," he responded. "He can find it by sight." Using the outline of Pumpkin Hill and a few distant trees as landmarks, Anthony was able to find the spot with minimal difficulty. To help maximize bottom time (which admittedly wouldn't be long) we went down on Nitrox. Surface currents here can sometimes be strong,



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Diver in the sun; Fan coral at Black Hills; Diver and reef at Ted's Point

but we lucked out and were able to descend quickly. As it was a blue water descent, Frank took along a second tank as a safety precaution.

Moments after descending, the seamount's dim silhouette loomed into view. Glancing at the depth on my computer, I saw my bottom time steadily click down into single digit numbers. Due to the incessant battering by strong currents, the summit was covered with short

knobby corals and a plethora of squat barrel sponges. I just got myself in position to take a photo and realized my depth was 42.6m. My remaining bottom time was all of three minutes! Not wanting to go into deco, I reluctantly started to ascend with the others. Final dive time: 20 minutes. Short but sweet.

That sentiment also summed up my weeklong visit. Utila took me completely and happily by surprise. Did it have the

Pacific's biodiversity? Of course not. Instead, I embraced the differences rather than bemoan them and experienced its wonderful dive sites and array of brand-new species. Alas, the whale sharks failed to make an appearance, but the diversity of undersea life, combined with wonderful people and an easygoing island ambiance makes Utila a must for all divers. I guess I'll just have to come back for the whale sharks. ■



fact file

Honduras



SOURCE: CIA.GOV WORLD FACTBOOK

History In 1821, Honduras became independent of Spain. Military rule followed for two and a half decades until 1982, when a freely elected civilian government came to power. The country proved a haven during the 1980s for anti-Sandinista contras fighting the Marxist Nicaraguan Government. Honduras was also an ally to Salvadoran Government forces, which were fighting leftist guerrillas. In 1998, the country was devastated by Hurricane Mitch, which killed around 5,600 people and caused about US\$2 billion in damage. The economy has slowly rebounded since then. Government: Democratic constitutional republic. Capital: Tegucigalpa

Geography Honduras is located in Central America and borders the Caribbean Sea, between Guatemala and Nicaragua. It also borders the Gulf of Fonseca (North Pacific Ocean), between El Salvador and Nicaragua. Coastline: 820km. Terrain is mostly mountainous in the interior with narrow coastal plains. Lowest point: Caribbean Sea 0m. Highest point: Cerro Las Minas 2,870m. Note: While the country has a short Pacific coast, it has a long Caribbean shoreline, including the mostly uninhabited eastern Mosquito Coast.

Climate Lowlands are subtropical; Mountainous regions are temperate. Natural hazards include common but mild earthquakes as well as frequent damaging hurricanes and floods along the Caribbean coast.

Environmental issues include expanding urban population; deforestation due to logging and clearing of land for agriculture; soil erosion and further land degradation accelerated by uncontrolled development and farming of marginal lands; heavy metal contamination of freshwater sources by mining activities. Honduras is party to the following agreements: Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Marine Dumping, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution, Tropical Timber 83, Tropical Timber 94, Wetlands.

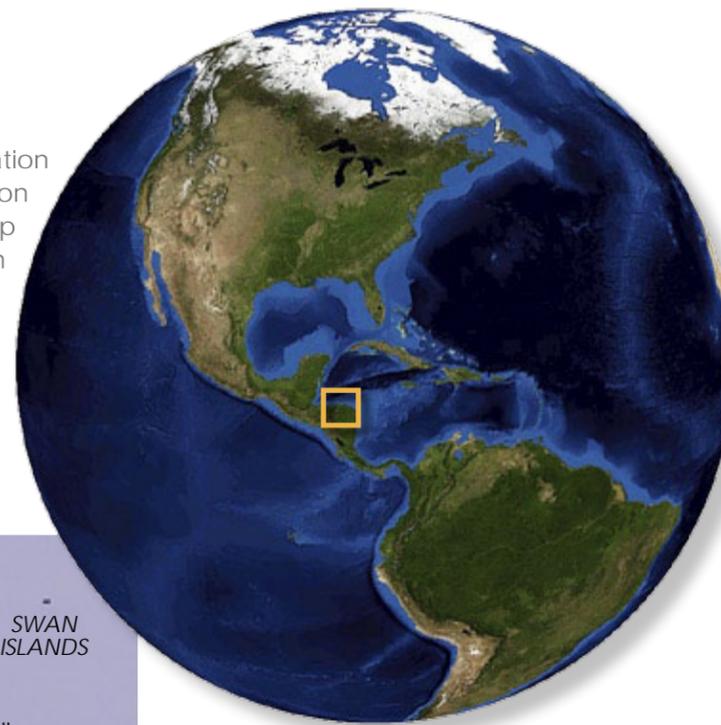
Economy Honduras is the second poorest country in Central America. It suffers from extremely unequal distribution of income, as well as high unemployment and underemployment. Heavily reliant on a narrow range of exports such as apparel, bananas, and coffee, the nation's economy is vulnerable to changes in commodity prices and natural disasters; but, investments in the maquila and non-traditional export sectors are contributing to a gradual diversification of the economy. Almost half of the country's economic activity is directly tied to the United States. In 2006, the U.S. Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) came into force. It has helped increase investment,

however security and political issues may be deterring potential investors. Marginal economic growth in 2010 will not improve living standards for those in poverty, which is almost 60 percent of the population. The fiscal deficit is growing, despite improvements in tax collections because of increases in current expenditures to cover increasing public wages. Natural resources: timber, gold, silver, copper, lead, zinc, iron ore, antimony, coal, fish, hydropower. Agriculture: bananas, coffee, citrus, corn, African palm; beef; timber; shrimp, tilapia, lobster. Industry: sugar, coffee, textiles, clothing, wood products, cigars.

Currency Lempiras (HNL) Exchange



RIGHT: Location of Honduras on global map
BELOW: Location of Utila Island on map of Honduras
FAR RIGHT: Detail from the Jade Seahorse garden



rates: 1EUR= 24.84HNL; 1USD= 18.92HNL; 1GBP= 29.42HNL; 1AUD= 17.94HNL; 1SGD= 14.21HNL

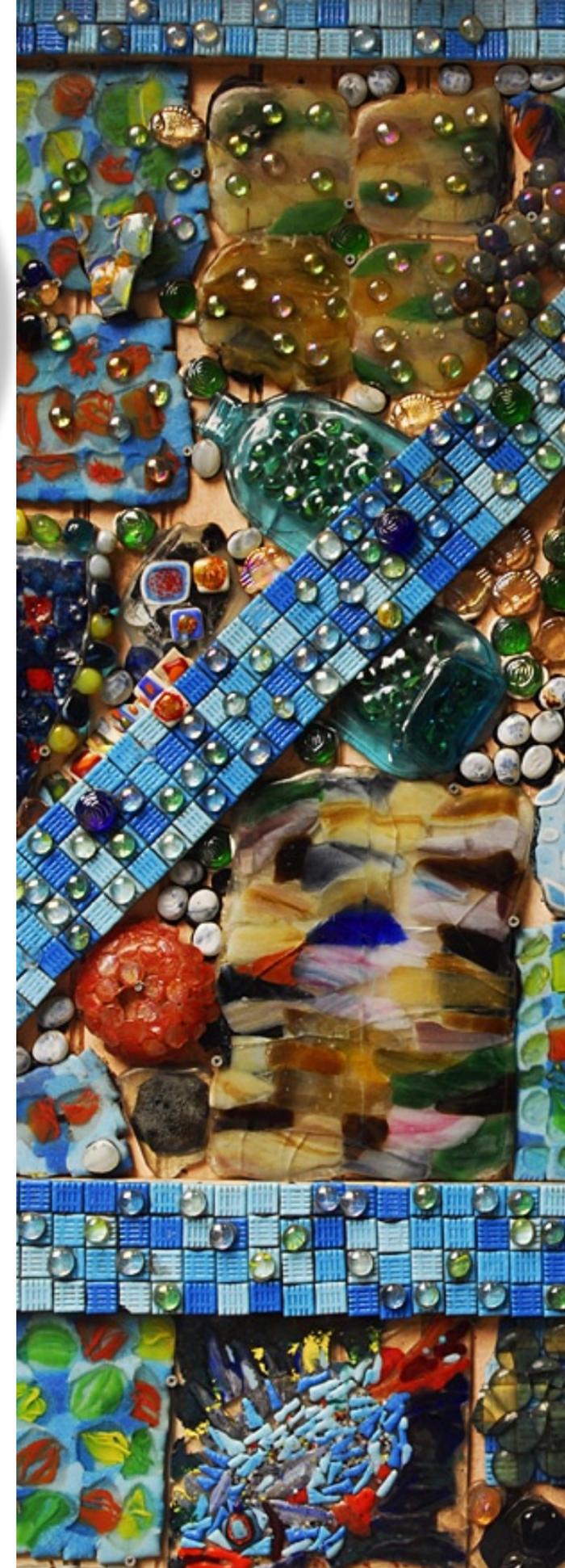
Population 7,989,415; Below poverty: 59% (2008). Ethnic groups: mestizo (mixed Amerindian and European) 90%, Amerindian 7%, black 2%, white 1%. Religions: Roman Catholic 97%, Protestant 3%. Internet users: 658,500 (2008).

Language Spanish, Amerindian dialects

Health There is a high degree of risk for food or waterborne diseases such as bacterial diarrhea, hepatitis A and typhoid fever as well as vectorborne diseases such as dengue fever and malaria and water contact disease such as leptospirosis (2009)

Hyperbaric Chambers
Utila Hyperbaric Chamber
Bay Islands College of Diving
Utila, Bay Islands of Honduras
www.dive-util.com

Websites
Let's Go Honduras
www.letsgehonduras.com



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, bobbit 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 Lembeh 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

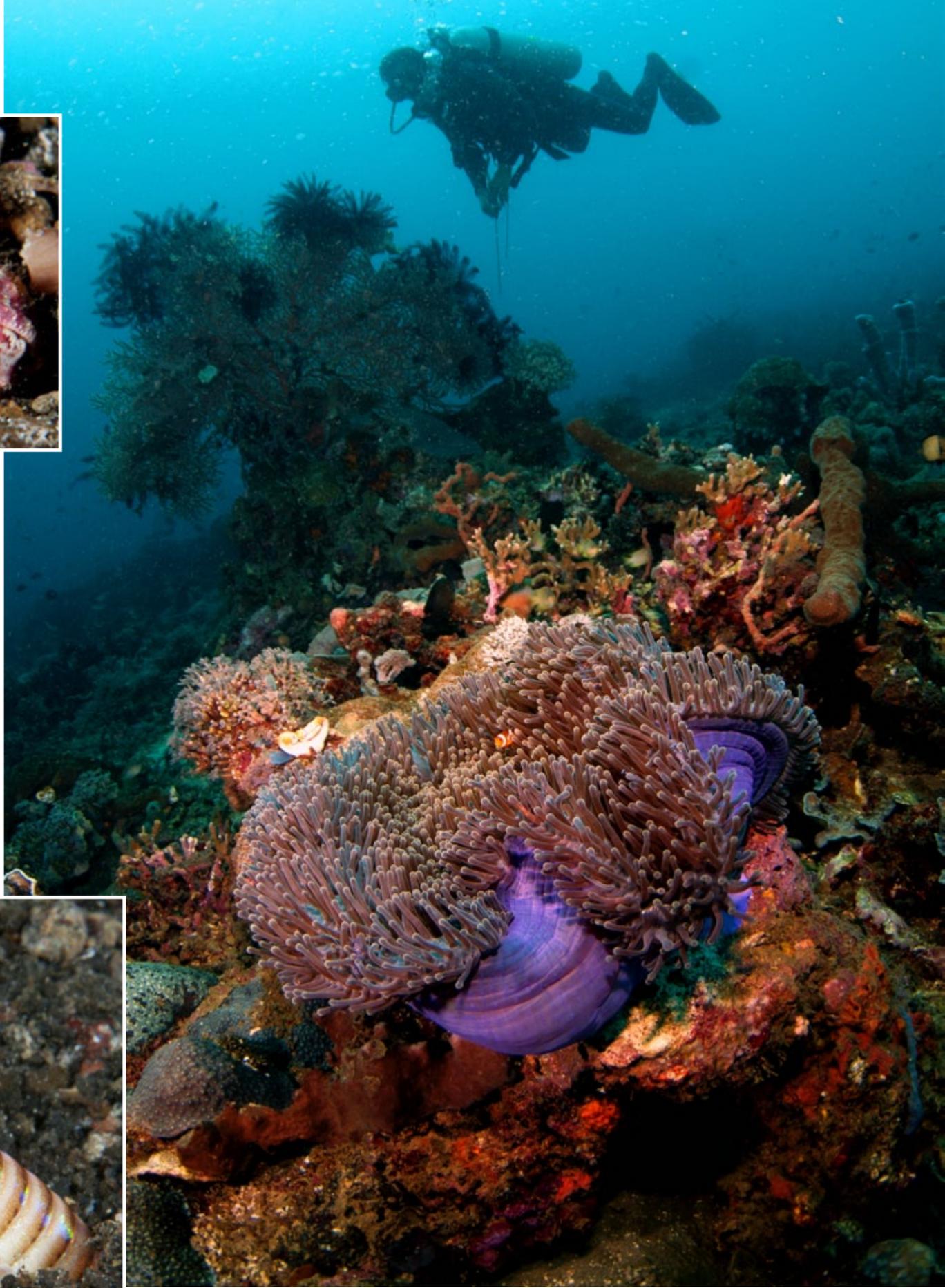
wall dives with virtually every inch covered by sponges, tunicates and hard corals. Clouds of anthias flitter about the reef, joined by fusiliers in the blue. What's missing is big critters; a shark sighting was a big deal. But to me the big deals were mating nudibranchs, ribbon eels, a juvenile lionfish 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

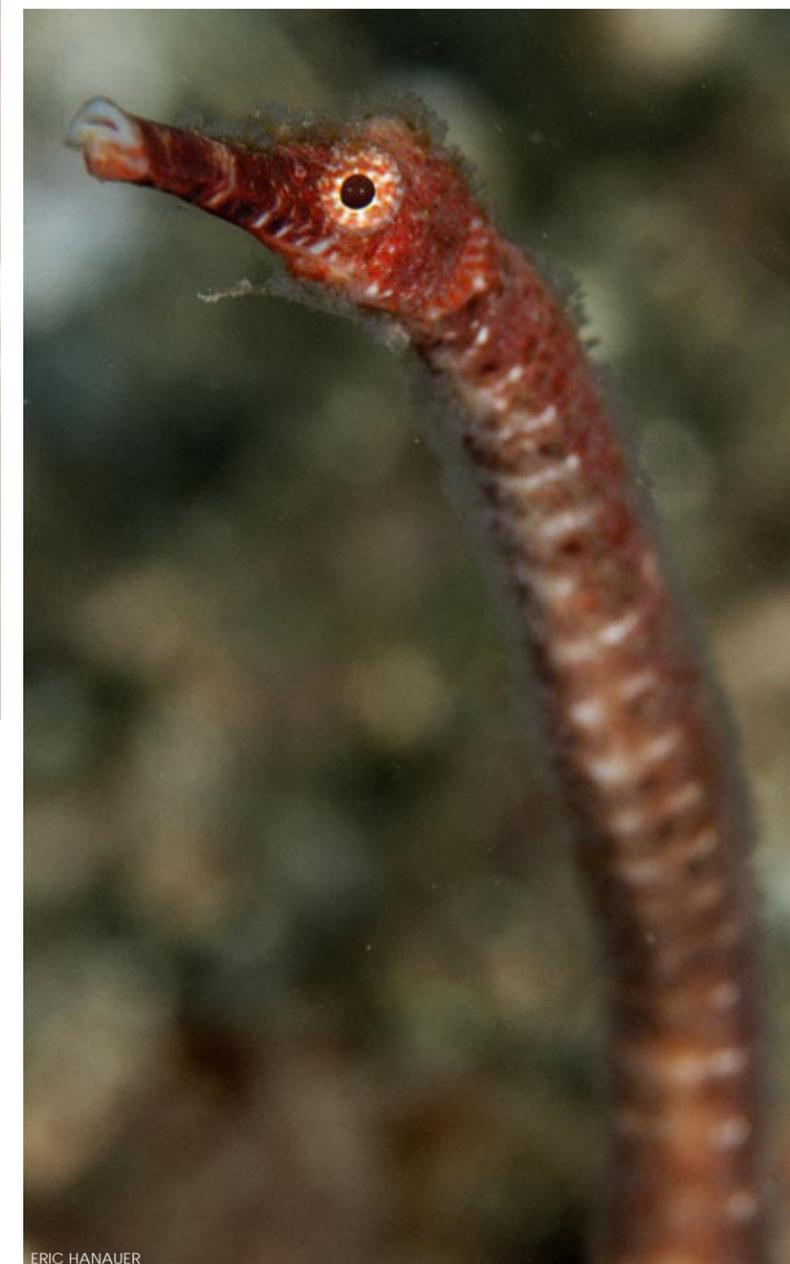
Thanks to Cocotinos and Kasawari resorts for their help in preparing this article.

Indonesia North Sulawesi

Text by Don Silcock
Photos by Eric Hanauer and Don Silcock

The island of Sulawesi lies like a large broken star in the middle of the vast archipelago that forms the country of Indonesia. It's remote location, roughly a third of the way between the huge islands of Borneo to the west, and New Guinea to the east, places Sulawesi right in amongst what is generally considered to be the richest marine environment in the world — the Coral Triangle.





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Zebra crab on fire urchin; Nudibranch; Pipefish. PREVIOUS PAGE: Shrimp on sea cucumber

Defined by the Nature Conservancy as the global epicenter of marine biodiversity, the Coral Triangle is characterized by more than 600 species of coral and 3,000 species of reef fish.

To put those numbers into perspective, the Red Sea has around 200 coral species and 1,000 fish species, and the Caribbean, 50 and 900 respectively.

Geographically, the Coral Triangle covers six countries—from

the Philippines in the north to the Malaysian state of Sabah on the tip of the island of Borneo in the west and the Solomon Islands to the east. In between lies Indonesia, East Timor and Papua New Guinea.

The scientific reasons for this tremendous biodiversity are complex and relate to a combination of factors including such technical issues as water salinity, temperature and speciation rates. However, there is little doubt that the phenomenal flow

of water that marine scientists refer to as the Indonesian Throughflow plays a significant role (see sidebar on next page).

Diving North Sulawesi

Divers are basically spoiled for choice when it comes to exploring this part of Indonesia. The area has its own international airport at Manado, serviced by direct flights from Singapore with Silk Air four times a week. Plus it's easily accessed from

both Jakarta and Bali, although that usually involves a short stop at Makassar (Ujung Pandang) in South Sulawesi.

At the tip of North Sulawesi are the Bangka and Gangga Islands, which receive the full force of the Indonesian Throughflow as it first touches land, and offer some exceptional diving if you are an experienced diver and know how to handle strong currents.

On the east coast, there is the critter mecca in the sheltered Lembeh

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DON SILCOCK

area of almost 90 hectares and 97 percent of it is water with the five islands in the park—Bunaken, Manado Tua, Mantehage, Siladen and Nain—occupying the other three percent.

Each of the five islands has its own flavor but the dormant volcano, Manado Tua, with its classic cone shape and sheer size, simply dominates the park. While Siladen Island, with its white sandy beaches and densely wooded interior, has a real desert island look about it. Bunaken Island, in the shadow of Manado Tua, is the most populated island and supports a population of around 4,000 people as well as the majority of the dive resorts that operate in the Marine Park.

The area is renowned for its blue waters, wall diving and pelagic encounters. It's easy to see why, when you look at



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Wolf lionfish; Lembeh Strait with the volcanic mountain looming on the horizon; Angelfish and trumpetfish; Nudibranch



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Straits and some of the most unusual things you will ever see underwater, while on the west coast there is the magnificent Bunaken Marine Park with its steep walls and blue water diving.

The whole area of North Sulawesi is very well served by an assortment of dive resorts plus a number of resident and visiting liveaboards and is

without a doubt a world class destination that justifies an extended stay to make the most of the tremendous diving available.

Bunaken National Marine Park

One of the first parks to be established in Indonesia, the Bunaken Marine Park was created in 1991. It covers an



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White mantis shrimp; Transparent shrimp; Nudibranch; Leaf fish

the variables at work, but the end results are biodiversity hot spots that produce some wonderful dive sites. The sites around the crescent shaped Bunaken Island best illustrate these mechanisms, because the island—lying as it does in the middle of the park—faces into the predominant northeast current.

nourished by the nutrients from the deep water basins to the north. But the underwater topography between the islands, and the 1,500m deep Manado Bay to the south, creates the swirling counter currents that feed the multiple dive sites on the southern side of Bunaken—such as Lekuan One, Two and Three on the southwest side and the really excellent Fukui on the southwest side.

Diving these sites is a heady experience—particularly on the vertical walls, which drop down into the abyss and create a feeling akin to vertigo on a clear day if you look down!

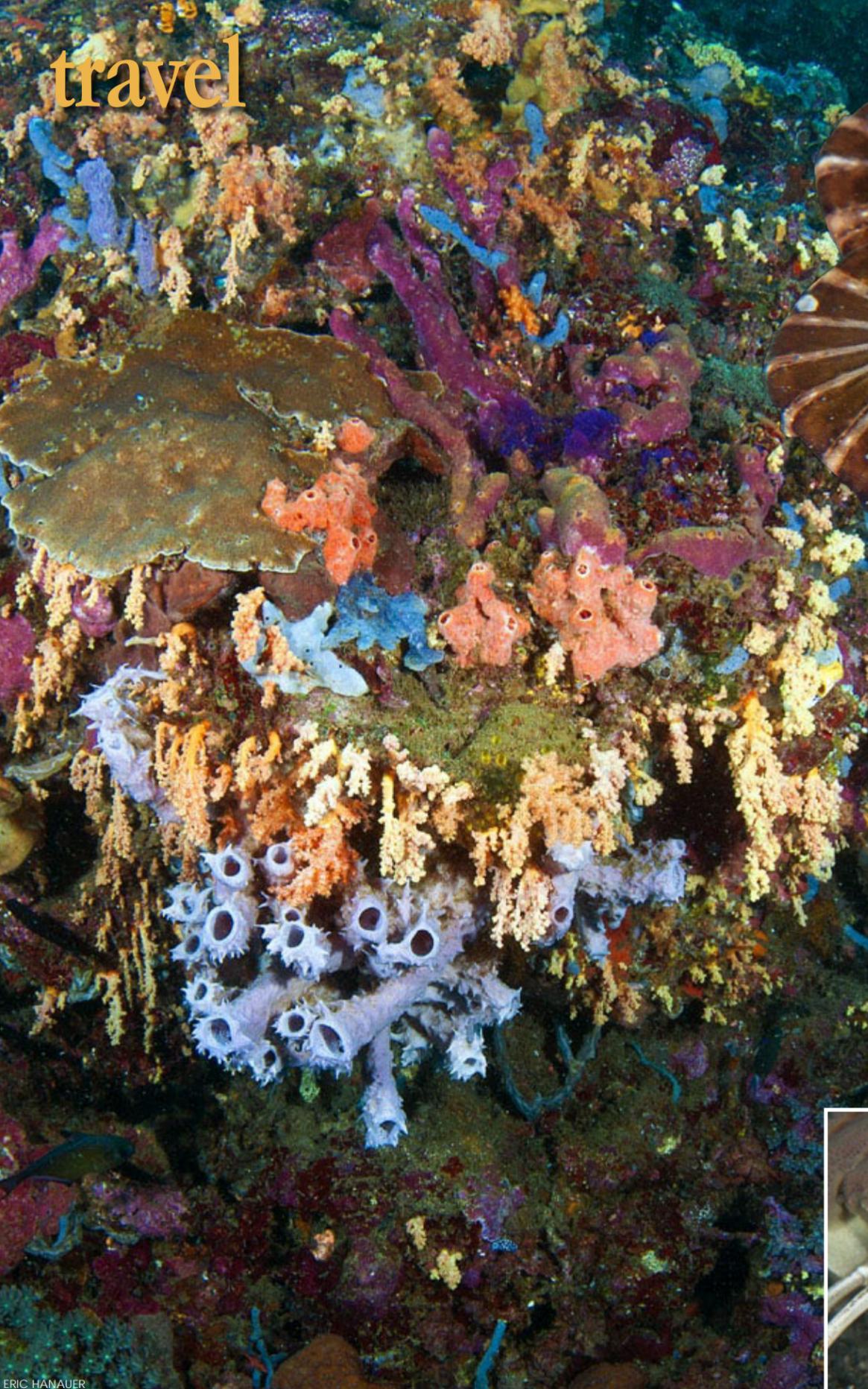
A mid-morning dive at Timur One and Two on the east coast of Bunaken is simply superb, and

the nutrient rich Throughflow surges past the five islands of Bunaken Park, it creates numerous counter currents around them.

The underwater topography and lunar cycles are just some of

The current is at it's strongest on the eastern and western sides of the islands and the sites there, such as Timur One and Two are rich in hard and soft corals, sponges and schooling fish,

the sea charts and have a basic understanding of the Indonesian Throughflow. The deep basins to the north and west of Bunaken and to the south in Manado Bay are the source of the blue water. As



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Sulawesi

probably my favorite dive of all, because the sun is perfectly positioned to illuminate the sloping wall and profusion of corals that provide the perfect backdrop to the clear blue waters.

Fukui was also a memorable dive with giant clams, schooling batfish and sweetlips. My encounter with the huge, ancient and completely indifferent green turtle at Lekuan One was something I will always remember.

So many sites, so much to see, so little time....

Bunaken Critters

The number of critters I encountered while diving Bunaken pleasantly surprised me



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ever tried to get a really good image of just one of these tiny but incredibly photogenic creatures actually looking at the camera will know why I was so excited about two of them both posing for me and for long enough for me to actually press the shutter.

There are some very basic rules for photographing critters. First, you obviously have to be at a site where they can be found. Then, you need the right camera and lens combination to fill the frame, and finally, you need to be able to spot them, and this is where the dive guides come in. There really is no substitute for a good guide, and I was constantly amazed at the critters Fendi could find and direct me to.

brought Andrew Lok's face. and a smile to

Andrew, the general manager of Cocotinos where I based myself for this trip, had assured me that there were some excellent critter diving sites less than ten minutes from the resort, but having dived the Lembeh Strait the year before, I have to say that I was not really convinced.

So, when I came back on just the second day of the trip with excellent photographs of two pygmy seahorses and a new Bahasa phrase learned from Fendi, my excellent Indonesian guide—*dua pygmy, empat mata* (two pygmies, four eyes)—I knew it was my turn to buy the beers for Andrew!

Anybody who has



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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Colorful invertebrates; Wonderpus; Hermit crab with anemones; Nudibranch; Slipper lobster





CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Local transport through the jungle; A busy day at the pier; Crinoids on sea fan

DON SILCOCK

Cocotinos Resort is located right in the fishing village of Kima Bajo in Wori Bay, north of Manado, and there are some great critter sites to the north of the bay at Aba Point and Odyssey Point and to the south at Gabet and Posi Posi.

Aba Point is a classic critter site, located in a small bay that provides protection from rough weather with a small river providing a constant source of organic nutrients and nearby deepwater for the essential cold water upwellings critters seem to thrive on. It was there that I was able to capture the two pygmies on a small gorgonian fan at 30m, but spent so long with them my beeping computer limited further exploration to an extended 5m deco stop.

The pygmy seahorse is in my opinion the single most

dangerous creature in the sea for underwater photographers!

Posi Posi to the south of Wori Bay is the place to be as the sun goes down because of its resident colony of mandarin fish and their nightly mating ritual—but make sure you get there early and get a good spot, as it can get crowded with boats from other resorts.

Being so close to the world's critter mecca of the Lembeh Strait is obviously challenging, and you won't find the really exotic critters, such as hairy frogfish and Ambon scorpion fish in Bunaken, but there is no doubt that there is a lot of small stuff to see on the western side of North Sulawesi.

Lembeh

There really is no other place quite like the Lembeh Strait—it's simply unique!

Located as it is between the eastern side of the tip of North Sulawesi and the island of Lembeh, the strait benefits from the rich flow of deep sea nutrients of the Indonesian Throughflow, and its cold waters plus sheltered bays on both the mainland and Lembeh side provide the protected areas for the critters to thrive.

And thrive they certainly do—attracting divers and underwater photographers from all over the world to witness the incredible selection of the weird, wonderful and downright strange creatures the sea can offer.

For underwater photographers, it's a "must do", and many divers will enjoy it, too. But it has to be said that it's not everybody's cup of tea. The water can be

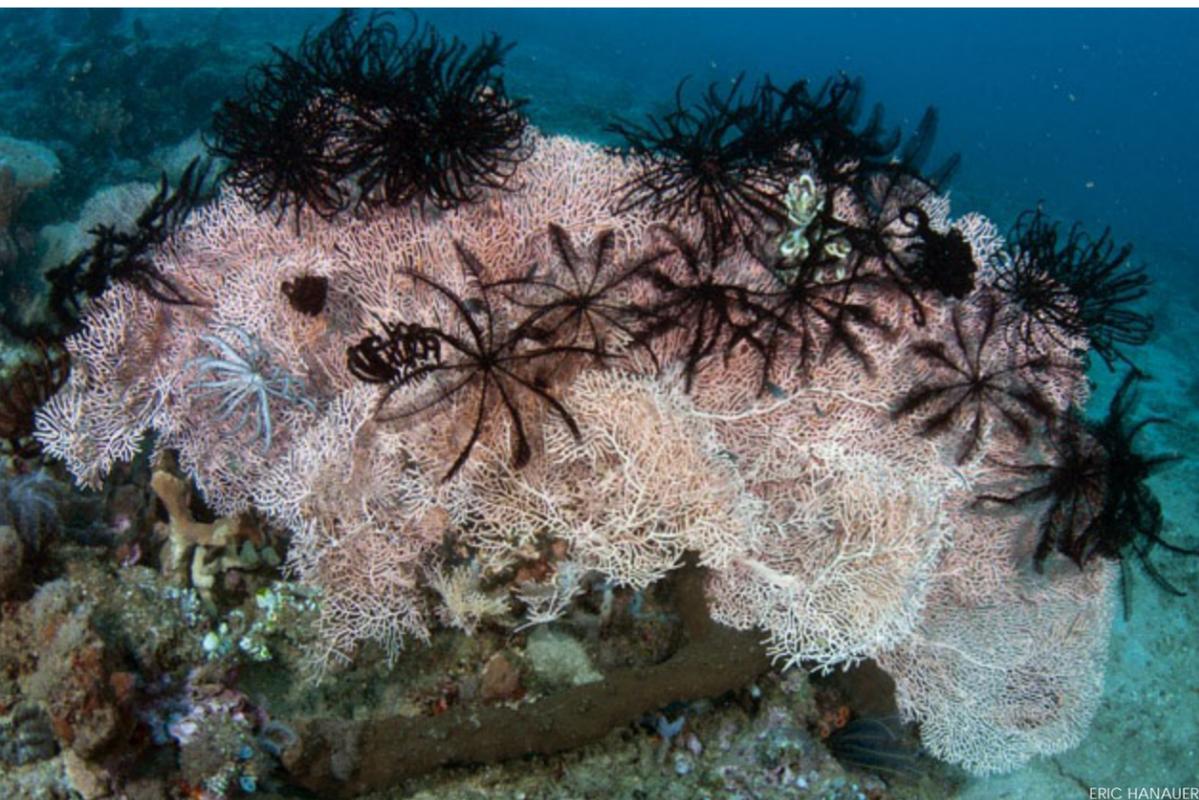
quite cool, and the visibility, challenging at times. Plus, if you are not taking photographs, critters that can disguise themselves to look just like a rock or

a crinoid look like rocks and crinoids and may not hold your attention like a stunning coral reef can.

I chose to stay at Cocotinos because its location at Kima Bajo meant that I could get to all the main dive sites around Bunaken. Plus, it's a relatively easy 90-minute drive over to Lembeh, which means that you can have the best of both worlds—diving the walls and reefs of Bunaken plus some of the famous sites in Lembeh like Hairball and Nudi Falls.

Having spent a week at Lembeh last year dedicated to critter diving, this balance of a couple of days there in between the rest at Bunaken proved to be a perfect way to spend ten days in North Sulawesi.

For more information, visit: www.indopacificimages.com ■



ERIC HANAUER

fact file

Indonesia



SOURCES: CIA.GOV WORLD FACTBOOK, STARFISH.CH

History In the early 17th century, the Dutch began to colonize Indonesia. From 1942 to 1945, Japan occupied the islands. After Japan's surrender in WWII, Indonesia declared its independence, however, it took four years of negotiations, recurring hostilities and mediation by the United Nations for the Netherlands to finally agree to transfer sovereignty in 1949. 1999 marked the year of Indonesia's first free parliamentary election after decades of repressive rule. The world's third-largest democracy, Indonesia is the world's largest archipelagic state. It is also home to the world's largest Muslim population. Current challenges include: improving education, alleviating poverty, curbing terrorism, initiating economic and financial reforms, controlling corruption, holding the military and police accountable for human rights violations in the past, addressing global warming, and controlling bird flu. An historic peace agreement with armed separatists in Aceh was reached in 2005, which led to democratic elections in Aceh in 2006. However, the government still faces sporadic armed resistance by the separatist Free Papua Movement. Government: republic. Capital: Jakarta

Geography Indonesia is an archipelago of islands located in Southeastern Asia, between

the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Coastline: 54,716 km. The terrain is mostly coastal lowlands with interior mountains on the larger islands. Lowest point: Indian Ocean 0m. Highest point: Puncak Jaya 5,030m. Note: Indonesia is made up of 17,508 islands of which 6,000 are inhabited. It straddles the equator in a strategic location adjacent to major sea lanes from Indian Ocean to Pacific Ocean. Piracy and armed robbery has been known to occur against ships in the territorial and offshore waters in the Strait of Malacca and South China Sea.

Climate Indonesia has a tropical, hot, humid climate with more moderate temperatures in the highlands. Natural hazards include severe droughts, occasional floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic activity and forest fires.

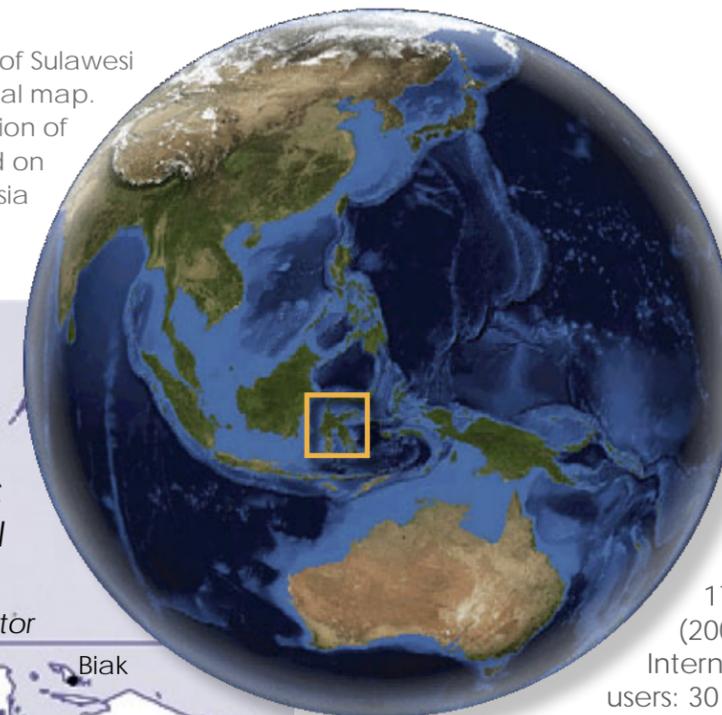
Environment Deforestation; water pollution from industrial wastes, sewage; air pollution in urban areas; smoke and haze from forest fires. Indonesia is party to agreements including: Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol,

Desertification, Endangered Species, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution, Tropical Timber 83, Tropical Timber 94, Wetlands. The country has signed, but not ratified Marine Life Conservation.

Economy As a vast polyglot nation, Indonesia has been able to weather the global financial crisis relatively smoothly due to its heavy reliance on domestic consumption as the impetus for economic growth. To counter the effects of the crisis, the government used fiscal stimulus measures and monetary policy and offered cash transfers to poor families. Consumption was partially buoyed by campaign spending in advance of legisla-

tive and presidential elections in 2010. Economic advances and significant reforms in the financial sector, including tax and customs reforms, the use of Treasury bills, and capital market development and supervision, were made under President Yudhoyono. Increasingly robust GDP growth and sound fiscal stewardship has steadily reduced Indonesia's debt-to-GDP ratio in recent years. Persistent challenges include poverty and unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, corruption, a complex regulatory environment, and unequal resource distribution among regions. Natural resources: petroleum, tin, natural gas, nickel, timber, bauxite, copper, fertile soils, coal, gold, silver. Agriculture: rice, cassava, peanuts, rubber, cocoa, coffee, palm

RIGHT: Location of Sulawesi Island on global map.
BELOW: Location of Sulawesi Island on map of Indonesia



line:
17.8%
(2006).
Internet
users: 30 mil-
lion (2008)

Language Bahasa Indonesia (which is the official, modified form of Malay), English, Dutch, local dialects (Javanese is the most widely spoken)

Health There is a high degree of risk for food or waterborne diseases such as bacterial diarrhea, hepatitis A and E, and typhoid fever, as well as vectorborne diseases such as chikungunya, dengue fever and malaria. Note: There have been cases in Indonesia of the highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza. However, it poses a negligible risk to visitors.

Hyperbaric Chambers
Manado (Sulawesi): Malalayang Hospital, tel: 0812-4302970; and Professor Dr Kan-dou Hospital, tel: (+62) 8134-0000840

Makassar (Sulawesi): Rumah Sakit Umum Wahidin Sudirohusodo
Tel: (+62) 0411-584677

Websites
Tourism Indonesia
www.indonesia.travel
North Sulawesi Promotion Board
www.north-sulawesi.org ■