



Italy's
Ponza Island

Text by Sabrina Belloni
Photos by Franco Banfi

— *The Isle of Circe the Sorceress*



Red and yellow gorgonian sea fans on wall of reef off Ponza Island



View of Ponza's harbour. PREVIOUS PAGE: Diver with red gorgonia at Le Formiche

The power of the island of Ponza lies in its ability to preserve an intangible aura of magic, which nature has given it, in the marriage of heaven and earth, water and fire, in the racing of land and sea after each other, relentlessly.

The archipelago of the Pontine Islands is an inexhaustible source of surprises, with its extraordinary landscapes, cliffs, caves and laces of rocks. The island's coasts are very jagged, formed mostly by high banks of volcanic rock, tuffaceous and vulcanite structures of wonderful colours. The only exception is Zannone, which is formed by limestone and dolomite, and looks like a gem. It is so green, covered with Mediter-

ranean shrubs. All are characterized by a succession of small coves, bays and inlets that give them a special charm.

The charm of the island of Ponza, one of the most beautiful in Mediterranean Sea, remains unchanged, year after year; at sunset, the sun colours the sky red and the rocks pink—a thin strip of rose on the horizon, a line dividing the turquoise of the sea from that of the sky.

When getting to Ponza from a city, it always seems a bit like a step back in time. A short ride on the sea and everything changes—the sounds, the smells, the atmosphere. Whenever one discovers Ponza from afar, one sees the same magic; its slim profile seems to be the gateway to an archipelago that doesn't exist. A crest of tuffaceous rocks that rises vertically from the crystal clear water, and climbs up,



Seahorse in seagrass



View overlooking the rugged and varied landscape and coastline of Ponza Island

running sinuous upon the sea, forming bays and inlets. It doesn't change while climbing through the narrow streets of the countryside, or on the heights of the island, towards the village of Le Fornia, where the houses seem to be balanced on the sharp ridge overlooking the two sides.

Ponza should be experienced in autumn, when the time of the pink sunset comes earlier and lasts longer, or in spring, when the island is covered by yellow blooms. September is a wonderful month: the summer tourist chaos gives way to the tranquillity of the island; the sea is crystal clear; the water turns blue or emerald green, depending on the time of day and the depth of seabed; the creeks are almost deserted; and the rocks appear to have sunnier and warmer colours.

In autumn, the beauty of Ponza pervades the streets and the staircases

that climb to elevated places, along the lines of the hills, where the eye sweeps over a breathtaking horizon. And breath taking, too, because of the effort to climb up the steep stairs, the muscles of the legs groaning, the breath becoming short. But it's all worth it, because below, one can see a panorama of rocks sculpted by wind and sea, the wide expanse of the Tyrrhenian Sea criss-crossed by white trails of small boats of a few tourists and a few fishing boats. Gusts of wind carry delicate scents of Mediterranean flowers and play on the waves. When the winds turn violent, they rush through the lanes and stairways, sculpting the rocks as if they were smoothed by the carving and expertise of an artist.

A walk to the promontory of Mount Guard takes us to the homonymous lighthouse on the southern side of the island. It is one of the best sites to go

ISLE OF CIRCE THE SORCERESS

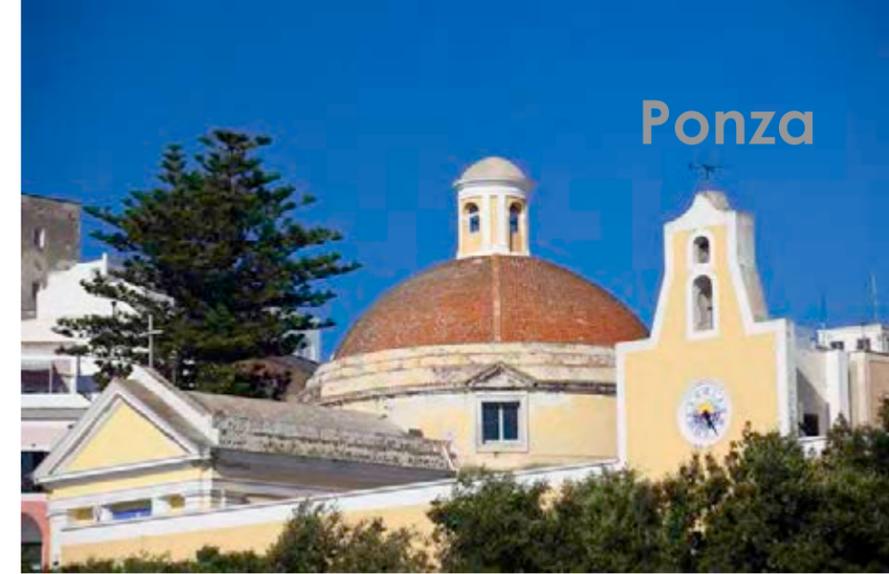
Suspected to be the mythical island of Aeaëa in Homer's *Odyssey*, Ponza Island is thought to house the cave of Circe, the sorceress who bewitched and seduced Odysseus, living with him for over a year, and turning his men into animals. Known today as Grotta della Maga Circe, the cave is located on the west side of the island, between Chaia di Luna beach and Capo Bianco. Apparently, there are archaeologists looking for evidence of Homer's *Odyssey* on Ponza today. □

SOURCE: WIKIPEDIA

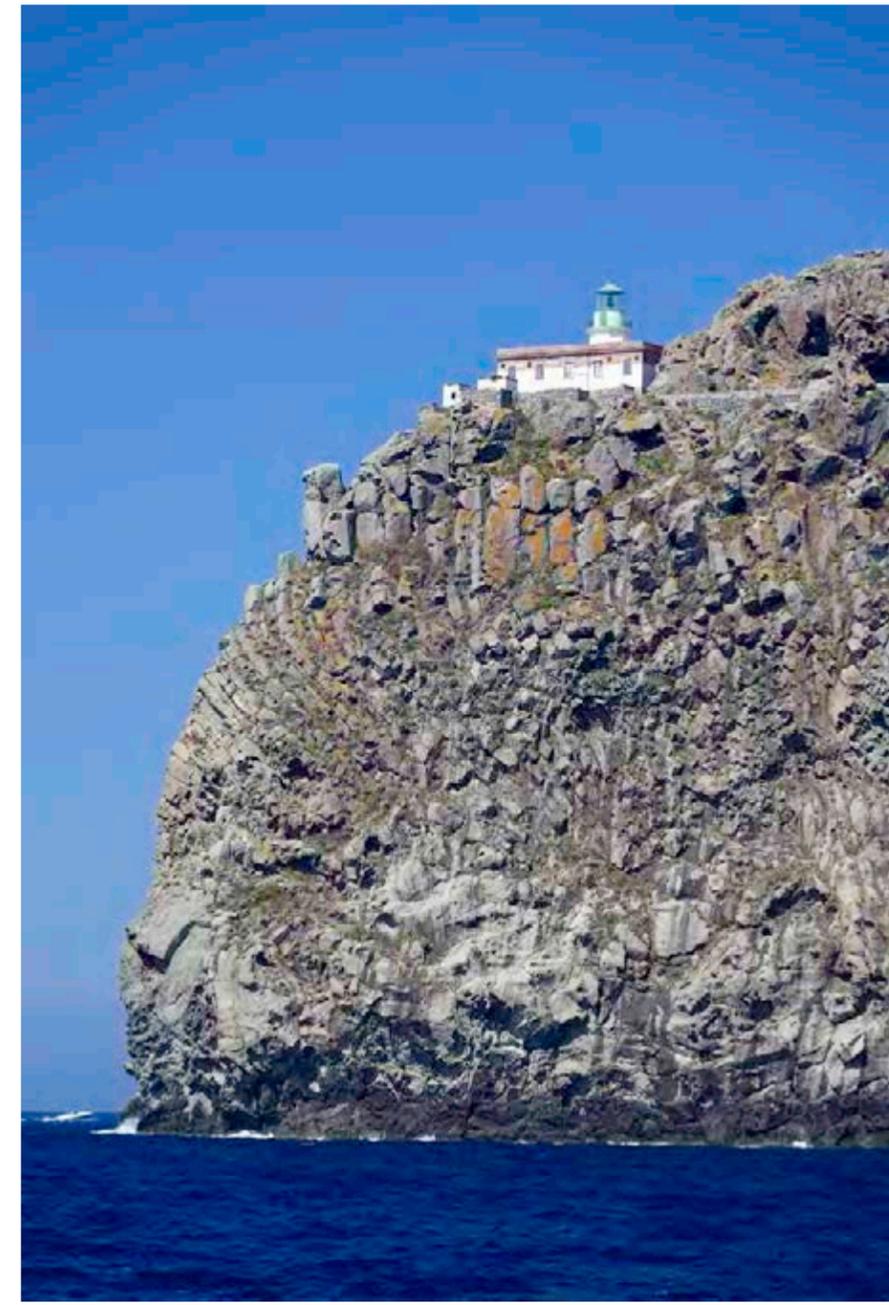
to see one of Ponza's famous sunsets, when the calm sea becomes golden and the sun sets over the horizon.

Dive operation

Similar to the harbour of nearby Ventotene Island, the main harbor of Ponza is a blaze of joyful colours and history as well as the hub of life on the island. Here at the harbor, fellow divers and I are awaited by Andrea Donati and



Ponza



Faro della Guardia, lighthouse of Mount Guard; Church of Ponza (top)



Entry to Ancient Roman *murenaio*



Ponza



LEFT TO RIGHT: Cave with encrusting red sponge; Ponza Harbor; Dive boat *Neptune*

Tanks and gear inside the dive center

the team of Ponza Diving Center: Daniela, Maria Paola and seasonal workers—a close-knit group of professionals devoted to and passionate about diving—who have made customer satisfaction a modus operandi, and safety and environmental protection a calling card, leaving nothing to chance. Last but not least, they offer delicious dishes from the kitchen of the dive boat *Neptune* during full-day dive trips.

The 16m-long *Neptune* is the flagship of the diving center—a fishing vessel that has been completely renovated and adapted for diving, with

a spacious, comfortable, furnished sundeck. Normally, it is moored in front of the door of the diving center, from whence guest divers discover the most beautiful dive sites of the island, with different characteristics and depths.

In recent years, Andrea Donati—the director and owner of Ponza Diving Center—has started specializing in rebreather and technical diving. Even in diving, as in all things, there is a trend, which has led to more and more divers going down into the water on CCR. Andrea firmly believes that beyond the high performance

that helps divers survive underwater on a rebreather, CCR's are much safer than open circuit. And he aims to encourage and help divers to try this different experience as well as support technical divers who like to play safer, longer and deeper.

Diving

The unifying feature of all the waters surrounding the islands of the Ponza's

archipelago is the extreme clarity, with backdrops that offer spectacular views and a set of colours and contrasts that are really unique.

While the natural world of the island has lost most of its native species, replaced by flora and fauna introduced by the inhabitants, under the surface of the water, nature has remained healthy, with an extraordinary richness of life that makes these



Ponza



Mediterranean fairy basslet at La Botte (left); Octopus on reef (above)

saic of environments that support the establishment of diverse benthic life. In the shadows, the rockslides are covered by bright orange-coloured colonies of *Astroides calycularis*, one of the few Mediterranean representatives of the Madreporite stony coral genus.

At the base of the walls, small tunnels and caves open up. Here, the darkness favours the establishment of typical biotic communities, with sciophilous characteristics that are usually seen in much deeper areas. Among the cascade of boulders and rocks full of holes and crevices, it is common to encounter octopuses and moray eels, blennies and damselfish, white bream and sea bream. There are huge and healthy fields of *Posidonia oceanica* seagrass.

Dive sites

Le Formiche. One of the most popular sites is definitely Le Formiche, a group of rocky outcrops that emerges in the southeastern side of the island, in front of the stacks of Calzone Muto. Le Formiche spreads out over a vast area of seabed and therefore offers different paths, allowing for multiple dives. Here, divers can swim among giant collapsed boulders that have holes where fish settle; or among lush meadows of seagrass, miniature forests where dozens of unusual and curious creatures rest, especially visible during night dives; or, if one prefers, the steep walls that descend to the sandy bottom at a depth of about 50m.

These walls, especially in deep and shadowy areas of the northeastern



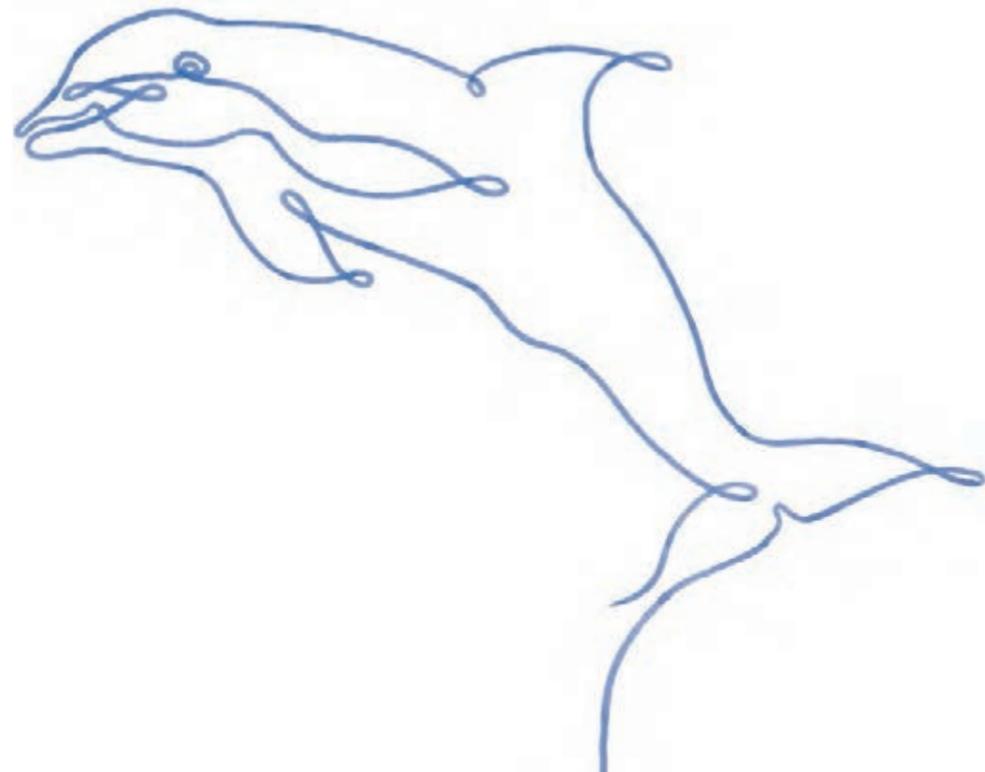
Cleaner shrimp and moray eel (above); Small rockfish inside a shell (top)

waters one of the most beautiful and important marine areas of the Mediterranean Sea.

The bustling coastal geography of the landscape, made up of cliffs, coves, craggy headlands, cliffs, islets and rocks, slopes underwater in a mo-

SEACAM

silver



cinema of dreams



www.seacam.com



Ponza



Hypselodoris fontandraui nudibranchs (left) Tunicates on yellow seafan at Le Formiche (above); Yellow cluster anemone at La Botte (below)

covered by *Parazoanthus axinellae*, or yellow cluster anemone. The arch is on the threshold of a wide canyon that narrows gradually. Divers swim in single file, being careful not to damage the walls, and arrive in a beautiful round cave. On the return, halfway into the canyon, divers come to a tunnel con-

connected to the rocky plateau from which they started the dive, and find themselves under the dive boat, *Neptune*.

Secca of Punta Papa. On the western side, beyond the Faraglioni of Lucia Rosa and the cape of Capo Bosco, there is a fascinating spot—the Secca of Punta Papa. It is a challenging

dive, recommended only for experienced divers.

Here, divers dive into absolute blue waters and follow the anchor chain down to the top of the bank, at a depth of 34m. The long descent offers one a feeling of total aloofness from the known world



side, are exposed to the currents of the east and colonized by red gorgonian sea fans and dense colonies of yellow gorgonians (*Eunicella cavolinii*). They are home to an exceptionally rich ecosystem, colonized by crinoids anchored on gorgonians, as well as sea slugs, forkbeards and groupers.

Ascending to shallower depths, divers pass through a natural arch





THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the LST 349

and prepares you to enjoy the marine life that lurks beneath.

A cloud of frantic damselfish greeted our group. We passed over them and stopped at our ascent point. Now we needed to reach the depth limit as soon as possible, down along a wall that ended at a depth of 56m on a sandy bottom.

The wall was colonized by large red and yellow sea fans, oriented in the direction of the current, where the long antennae of lobsters could be seen peeping in and out. Among the crevices, we saw some moray eels and a pair of octopuses.

Unfortunately, at these depths, the minutes of decompression stops builds up fast, and our bottom time was penalized. For us it was time to go back, a journey that gave us some opportunities for long views into the blue in search of some pelagic fishes that often frequent the bank.

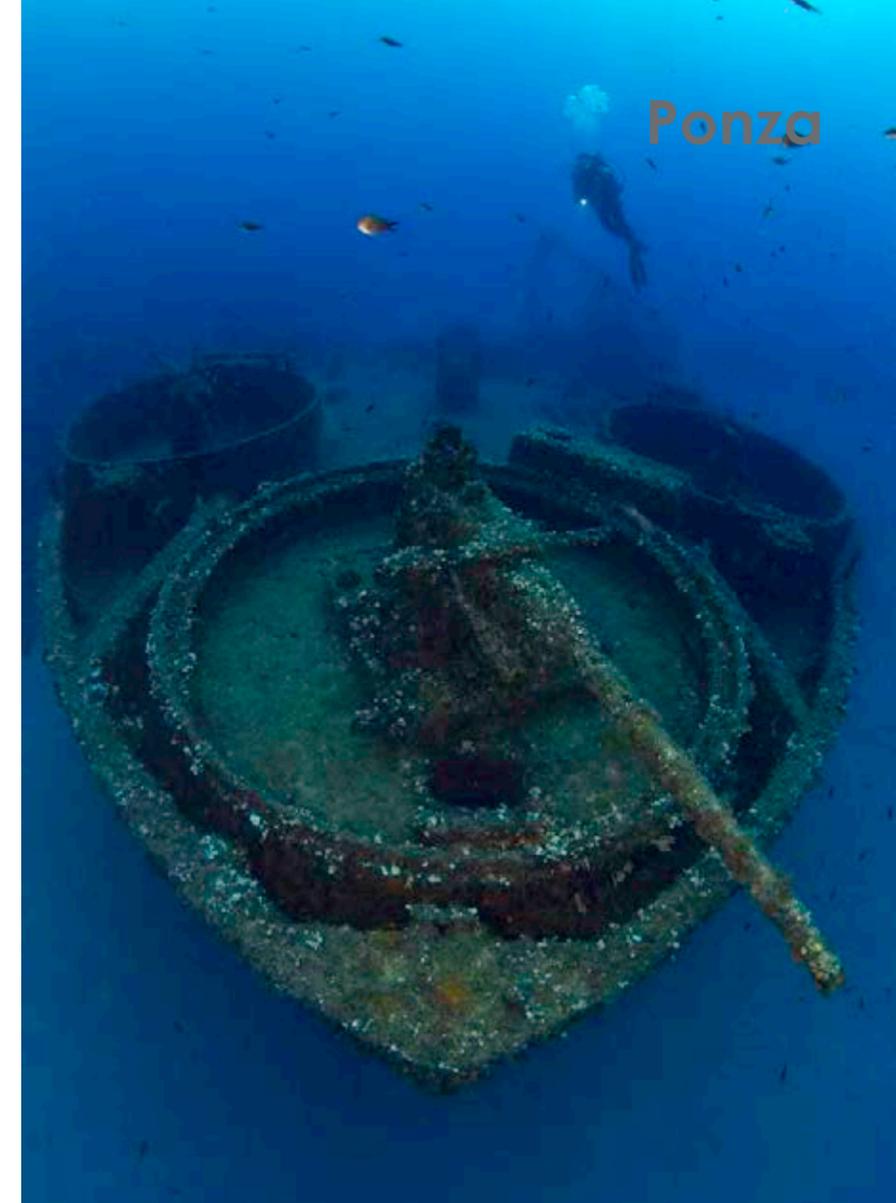
This is probably one of the reasons why Andrea, a TDI Instructor, is now specializing in technical diving with Inspiration and JJ rebreathers. Sometimes he whizzed by us with an underwater scooter, a comfortable Zeuxo, with which we admired his twirls and excellent agility.

Punta Papa wreck. Not far from the Secca of Punta Papa, there is a dive suitable for



everyone. It is the wreck of Punta Papa, the LST 349 (Landing Ship Tank)—a flat-bottomed boat used for the transportation of the troops and trucks of the Allied forces during World War II.

She was launched on 7 February 1943



Ponza



Wreck of the LST 349, a British Landing Ship Tank sunk in 1944



Ponza



TOP TO BOTTOM: Nudibranch, seaslug and tubeworms

Cuttlefish (left); Invertebrate (above); Diver with scooter at rock with yellow cluster anemone and bryozoans, La Botte (above)

subsequent explosion of her boilers caused the ship to brake in two.

The bow lies in a perfect position for navigation to a depth of 26m. Its dark shape, which stands out on the white sand, offers a truly evocative scene. On the main deck, winches and machine guns are still present, while below deck divers can explore the holds that now provide shelter to some conger eel, small moray eels, scorpion fish and other marine life. The surrounding sandy bottom is littered with wreckage. Unfortunately there is not much left of the stern. It lies not far away, at a depth of 20m.

Punta Madonna. Another easy dive, suitable for all, is Punta Madonna, which is a fascinating site for

a night dive. It is only a few minutes from the port, behind the Grotte di Pilato.

At dusk, we moored the *Nep-tune* behind the stacks of the Punta della Madonna cape and dived to a depth of only seven meters—a dive which gently sloped down towards the sea. Along the wall we saw small groupers, very colourful sponges and tubeworms. On the sandy bottom, millet butterflyfish sifted the sand in search of prey.

At about 18m, we encountered some rocks around which a group of striped white bream swam. The light of day gave way to the shadows of the night and the sessile fauna, illuminated by our torches, fascinated us with its bright colours.

The vault of an arch was com-

pletely colonized by beautiful orange *Astroides calycularis* coral. A curious cuttlefish, with the characteristic w-shaped eyes, watched us trying to go unnoticed, making its mantle quiver with the rhythm of the surf, suspended above a prairie of Mediterranean seagrass. We climbed back into the boat that was now dark, but the lights of the harbour welcomed us as soon as we turned the corner around the Cape and the Red Rock.

Topside excursions

There are many topside adventures to enjoy on Ponza Island. Bring comfortable and light casual clothing, a sweater for cooler evenings, comfortable walking shoes and a map if you want to hike and



and assigned to military operations in the Mediterranean. The vessel sank a year later, on 26 February 1944 at Cala dell'Acqua because of a storm that caused the ship to break on the rocks. A



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP CENTER: Sea urchin; Cnidarian on seagrass; Stingray resting on sandy seafloor; Diver with sidemount investigates sea fans on reef

Inside Ancient Roman *murenario* (left); Piana Bianca rock formation at Ponza Harbour (above)

ty of tourists.

The boat tour continues to Punta Santa Maria, which welcomes visitors with its many coloured houses that give the island its unique character. The tour continues past a rugged coastline and arrives in the Baia del Frontone.

After passing the famous rock known as "La Foca" in the bay of Punta Bianca, the tour boat will reach the Cala del Core, which has a wide pebble beach. Here, visitors arrive at the Scoglio del Parroco and the unsettling Cala dell'Inferno, named for the famous remains of a wrecked ship.

After Punta Nera and Faraglione of Antonio Aniello, the tour boat reaches Cala Spaccapolpi which lies next to a natural arch.

Further on, visitors can see Cala Felce, Cala Caparra, Capo Rame, Punta Beppe Antonio, Cala Cecata, Cala Cavone, Punta di Papa and Cala dell'Acqua, where ships procure the island's water supplies.

Turning around Punta Corte, visitors see a wonderful show: the Cala Feola, one of the most fascinating corners of the island. You have to explore the beach of Lucia Rosa, Punta Capo Bianco, with its caves, and Chiaia di Luna, a wide sandy beach surrounded by a wall of clear rocks.

The tour of the island ends with the Punta del Fieno, Punta della Guardia, the inlet of Bagno Vecchio, the Faraglioni del Calzone Muto and Punta della Madonna.

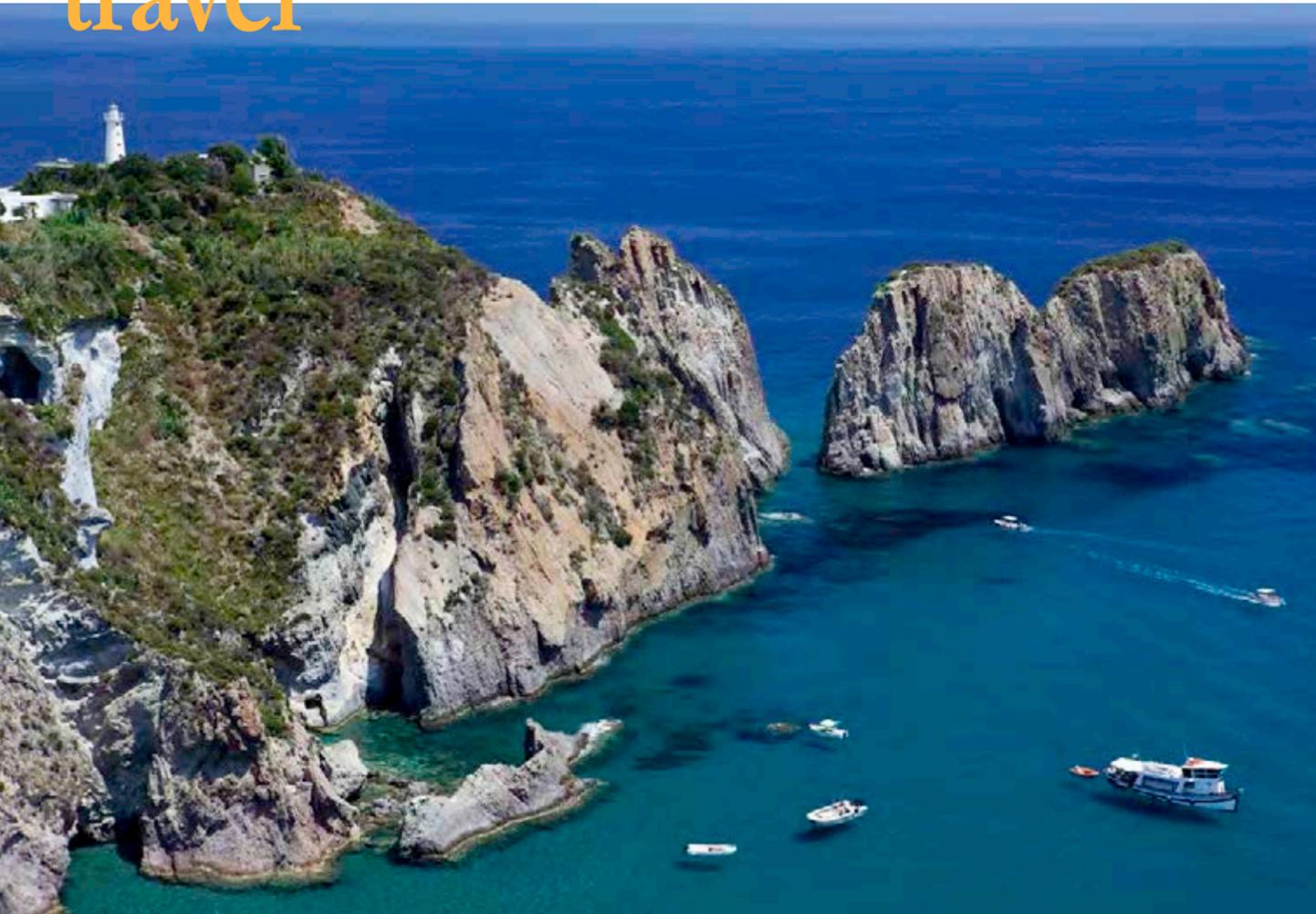
Afterthoughts

Ponza Island has some of the most beautiful and wild dive sites of the Tyrrhenian Sea. There is an ease of access to the diving; with just a few metres from the diving centre to the dive boat, trips are run by a professional dive team and a functional dive center. And the diving is suitable for rebreather and technical divers, with relatively cheap dive packages. Honestly, I didn't find any minuses to the place except perhaps that while English is spoken, German is not. However, this is Italy after all, and in town, there are superb restaurants, pizzerias, pubs and wineries serving excellent fare at decent prices. □



explore the island.

The tour around the island by boat requires a few hours. The boat tour passes by the two beaches of St. Anthony and Giancos outside Porto. They are very easy to reach and because of this reason, unfortunately, there are plen-



continues to Formia and Anzio Harbour. By train, you can get to Ponza Island from the railway stations of Formia and Anzio. Reaching the station you will walk (5 minutes), following the signs to the harbour. By car, you must get to the harbour of Anzio. From Rome, you can take the highway, then the mainroad Pontina towards Latina, exit at junction Anzio-

Nettuno, continue on the road following the signs for Nettunense Anzio. By boat, the season to reach the island of Ponza on a ferry are mainly in the summer. Check with the ferry service for times of departure.

From Anzio and Formia: Hydrofoils Vetur www.vetor.it Motorboat Laziomar www.laziomar.it

From Terracina: Motorboat Snap Navigation www.snapnavigazione.it

From Naples: SNAV hydrofoils www.snav.it



Parmesan cheese wheel and sausage (far left); Red chili peppers in shop window (lower left) and fruit and vegetable stand in Ponza (below)

Diving and lodging

The center rents out Mares equipment, Santi drysuits, JJ rebreathers, and Teseo and Zeuxo underwater scooters. Write an email to the diving centre to get advice on travel, accommodations, restaurants, etc. Apartments are also available to rent, and the dive centre can help you find what you are looking for. As for telecommunications, hand phones with national operators work properly. Visit Ponzadiving.it or email: info@ponzadiving.com

Franco Banfi is a widely published, award-winning underwater and wildlife photographer and author based in southern

Switzerland. His work has been published in Animan, Focus, GEO, National Geographic Italy and Terre Sauvage. He has won awards for his images from the Travel Photographer of the Year 2011 competition, Nature's Best Photography Ocean View Photo Contest 2011 and the 2010 International Photography Awards. Visit: www.banfi.ch



RIGHT: Global map with location of Ponza Island
BELOW: Location of Ponza Island on map of Italy



NASA

Bali's Tulamben

Text and photos by Nick Shallcross
Wreck photos by Christian Loader

— *Muck Diving Heaven*





Pair of Coleman shrimp on a fire urchin. PREVIOUS PAGE: *Risbecia tryoni* nudibranch

Standing on the beach staring out at the deep blue water, it's hard to imagine a world so vibrant and full of life lying just a few meters away from our feet. My dive group and I shuffle slowly into the water, careful not to slip on the smooth black stones beneath our boots. With all our gear in place and a quick press of our deflators, we descend down into this beautiful wonderland hidden just below the surface.

Tulamben

Widely known as one of Bali's most popular diving destinations, Tulamben was put on the diving map after the discovery of the USAT *Liberty* wreck lying just meters offshore. Once a sleepy fishing village, it has now been transformed into a world famous dive destination, and for good reason too. Located in the North East of the island, Tulamben sits in the shadow of Mount Agung, Bali's highest volcano. Its name even derives from the word *batulambih* meaning many stones, a reference to Mount Agung's destructive past. It is these eruptions that have shaped the region into what it



Tiny juvenile clown frogfish near the *Liberty* wreck



A local porter carrying dive equipment to the beach



The main street running through town is lined with flowering trees

Tulamben

through the middle with nothing more than a handful of restaurants, bars and shops, and of course, plenty of dive centres.

There is limited access to ATM machines, with only one located in the town so don't forget to bring enough cash for your stay or ask your driver to stop at one of the many moneychangers along the way. Most dive centres take payment by card for the diving but you will need cash when paying for meals in town or any other activities. As far as eating goes, there are a few options in the dive resorts and around town with restaurants and bars offering both local and western dishes to suit everybody's taste. Local

dishes such as Gado Gado, Nasi Campur and the various Satay sticks with delicious peanut sauce are all delicious and fantastic value.

If you find yourself with some free time when not diving, take a drive to the nearby temples and water palaces to take in some local history and culture, visit neighbouring town Kubu for some relaxing Spa treatments or even just take a walk in the hills behind the town to get a feel for the spectacular scenery. No trip to Bali is complete without a stop off in Ubud, located high up in the hills on the way back to the airport and making a great stop off for a few nights before heading home. Visit the local markets and

is today and gives the landscape above and below the water a very distinctive feel.

The fishing trade that once drove the town has made way for the diving industry leaving the protected waters in the surrounding area teeming with marine life. The many people who would have once played their part in the busy fishing scene now keep the booming diving industry heading in the right direction by carrying out important jobs such as expert dive guides, Jukung boat drivers and tank porters. These porters can often be seen carrying up to 3 full sets of equipment on the back of their bike or balanced effortlessly on top of their heads without even breaking a sweat, don't try that at home! The town itself still has that sleepy village feel, with one main road cutting



View looking down the bay towards Drop Off



Peacock mantis shrimp (left) emerging from its burrow; Scorpionfish (right) resting on a sponge; *Glosodoris atromarginata* nudibranch (lower right) sitting the current

tanks, the ease of diving in Tulamben was a welcome surprise. With our masks, fins and cameras in hand, we followed our expert guide on foot to the various entry points at the beach and moments later, our gear would arrive balanced on the head of one of the porters or piled up on the back of a motorbike ready to go diving. When we were done, we simply left our tanks lined up at the beach and our guide would call out to a passing porter on the short walk home, and the gear would then arrive back at the dive centre ready for a full tank of air for the next dive.

The entries can be a bit wobbly and thick-soled div-



jewellers, take a scenic stroll through mile upon mile of rice paddies or even white water rafting for the more adventurous.

Diving

Most of the diving in Tulamben is done from the shore along the large curved bay making the cost of diving incredibly low. Prices start from as

little as US\$20 per dive and most dive centres offer accommodation and diving packages to keep things easy. There are loads of dive centres in and around town to choose from, with most of them situated within walking distance of the beach. After seeming to spend most of my working career in the dive industry loading boats or trucks with dive equipment and



Crinoid squat lobster



sloped off into the distance making for an easy relaxed descent. At around 6m the stones give way to a black volcanic sandy sea floor, which is home to the huge variety of fish and critters that make

ing booties are recommended to protect your feet while getting in and out. I had my camera passed to me once I was in the water and fully kitted up to minimize the risk of it being dropped while getting in. Wading out just a few meters however, the seafloor slowly

Tulamben so popular with underwater photographers. The bay itself is home to many dive sites, most of which are accessible from the beach, the most famous being the Drop Off, Coral Garden and of course the Liberty Wreck. Conditions at these dive sites



LEFT TO RIGHT: Huge frogfish lying in wait for its next meal; Ornate ghost pipefish; Longnose hawkfish on the wall at Drop Off

cater for most divers experience levels, with generally mild currents and great visibility and all sites can be dived at various depths.

Coral Garden.

Lying in the centre of the bay, the Coral Garden hosts a huge coral reef spanning over 100m across the sea floor at depths of 5–12m and provides plenty of photographic opportunities, both macro and wide angle. With its sheer size and abundance of marine life, you can spend dive after dive swimming between the beautiful coral formations.

This area of reef gives everyone something to see, whether that is sitting back and watching the schools of snapper and sweetlips dance their dance or get your face right in close to search for the smaller things the reef has to offer. Keep

an eye out for cuttlefish impressively camouflaging themselves with their surroundings, or catch a glimpse of the stunning blue and yellow ribbon eels.

These delicate little eels are usually seen with their heads poking out of their burrows, but it's easy to see how they get their names when you see one swimming freely along the reef. I found myself momentarily mesmerised by a small black and yellow object fluttering towards me just like a ribbon on the end of a stick. It wasn't long before it disappeared into a small crack in the reef and my brief hypnosis came to an end and it was time to catch up with the group.

Have a look out into the blue every now and again to have a chance at seeing some of Tulamben's rare sightings like the occasional blacktip reef shark and Napoleon wrasse.

Drop Off. Head towards the southeast corner of the bay, you will find the Drop Off, a stunning selection of lava flows



Brightly coloured ribbon eel



Hypselodoris infucata nudibranch



jutting out into the bay. You can either enter from the beach or rent one of the many Jukung boats to take you a little further round the headland for a change from the usual shore dive. When entering from the shore, we usually started from an area known as The River, which for most of the year is a dry riverbed running down from the hills and out into the bay. During the wet season, this is the main source of the sediment that settles on the seabed. This area at the start and end

of the dive is famous in itself for the infrequent sightings of the bizarre critters like mimic octopus, skeleton shrimp and tiny juvenile frogfish. Descending down past this sandy plateau you soon find yourself staring down over the Drop Off. Depths here vary from the shallow reef down to 12m, before a sheer vertical wall drops down well in to technical diving ranges. It is here where you will find a vast array of fish and stunning scenery along the face of the steep



Frogfish (left) on an artificial reef at Seraya Secrets; Anemone shrimp (above) in its protective home; Tiny pygmy seahorse blends perfectly with its surroundings (right); The brightly coloured *Nembrotha cristata* nudibranch (lower right)

sloping rock faces that plummet down to the depths below you. Scour the rocks as you slowly swim along for longnose hawkfish, hairy squat lobsters, soft coral crabs and leaf scorpionfish among many other things. Look carefully in the huge sea fans to find the elusive pygmy seahorses

that without the expert guidance of our guide, Komang, we would have easily missed. Once presented with a large gorgonian sea fan, he gestured to us to search the fan ourselves to see if we could spot them. After a few minutes of staring cross-eyed we finally found one,



Leaf scorpionfish on the wall at Drop Off



Tulamben



Seraya Secrets. Travelling a little further South, Seraya Secrets is a must see for any real macro enthusiasts, accessible by car only a short drive from the main town. With no real major coral formations, the gently sloping black sand is home to some of the amazing critters that make the area famous for macro diving. Seahorses, nudibranches, frogfish, Coleman's shrimp and harlequin shrimp are amongst some of the marine life you are likely to see while exploring the sandy ridges. The rich abundance of macro life makes this many divers' favourite site in the area, providing many interesting macro photography opportunities.

camouflaged almost perfectly with the fan behind it. Ecstatic and very proud of ourselves, we turned to Komang who sat quietly giggling to himself while signalling to us that there were another five living in the same sea fan. Admitting defeat we invited him closer to effortlessly point them out for us.



CHRISTIAN LOADER / SCUBAZOO



CHRISTIAN LOADER / SCUBAZOO



CHRISTIAN LOADER / SCUBAZOO

The wreck

Without a doubt the most popular dive site in the area, the USAT *Liberty* wreck is what made Tulamben famous as a dive destination and really put it on the map, drawing people from around the world to come and dive it.

Once a United States Army transporter, she was torpedoed by the Japanese in 1942 during WWII. In an attempt to save the ship from sinking, it was towed towards land but had to be beached before it reached port after taking on too much water. This is where she sat until 1963 when Mount Agung's most recent and violent eruption drove her into the sea to where she lies today.

Lying on her starboard side just 40m off the beach, the wreck is very easily accessible to all divers and even snorkelers. Walking in off the beach, we were led down a small valley in the sand until the stern of the wreck appeared in front of us, instantly recognizable by the intact rudder sticking out of the black sand. Looming over us, the wreck shows clear signs of its disastrous history, with large pieces of its thick metal hull twisted and broken where it lies in its final resting place.

Due to the healthiness of the water, the entire structure is now encrusted with corals and sea fans, and if it wasn't for the recognizable features that our still visible, it would

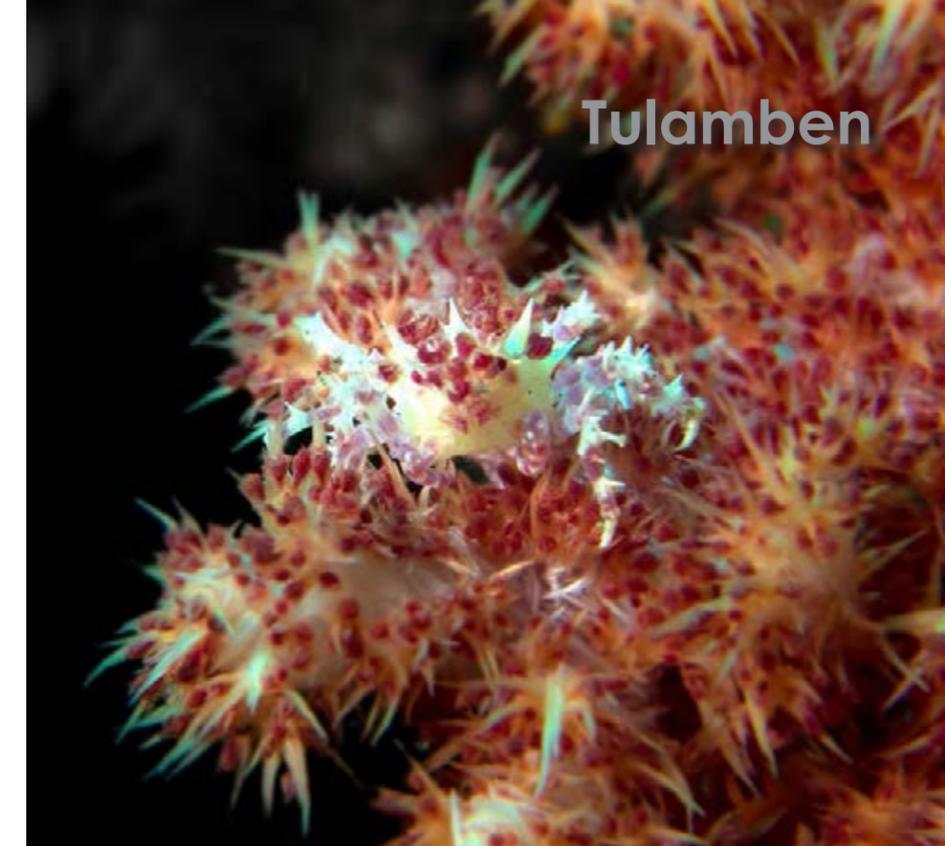
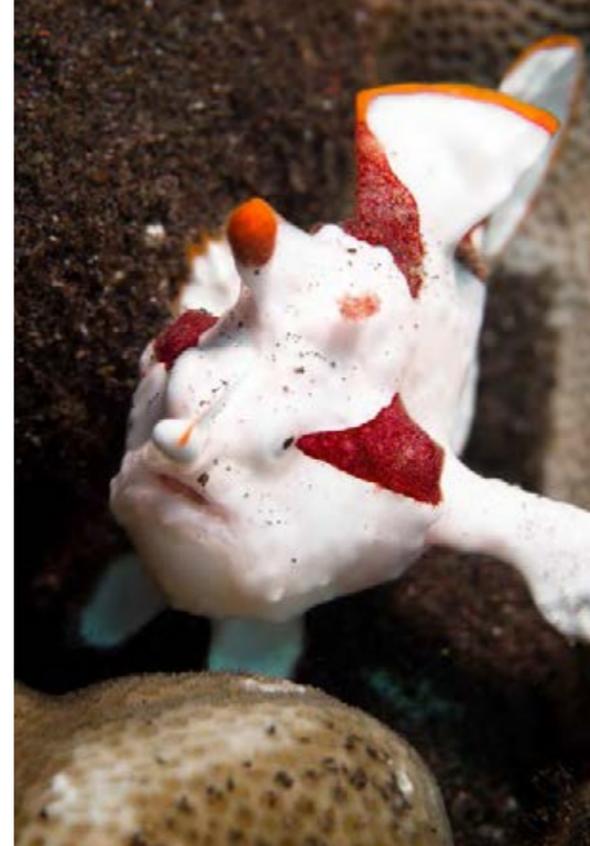
be very easy to forget that you are diving on what used to be ship.

Making your way down its side, you quickly get an idea of the sheer size of the wreck. Lying on her side at depths ranging from 5m all the way down to 30m, and being over 120m long, it can take a few dives too really see the whole thing.

While the wreck is home to a huge amount of macro life, it's the big stuff that a lot of people come to see, such as Napoleon wrasse, barracuda and the resident school of bump-head parrotfish. These bizarre giants arrive late in the afternoon and rest on the wreck overnight before heading off into the depths again early in the morning.

THIS PAGE: Scenes from the wreck of the USAT *Liberty*





Tulamben



The day trippers arrive later in the morning so make this the first dive of the day and enjoy peaceful dives at some of the area's other dive sites for the rest of the day.

Even safety stops on the wreck are interesting with a large colony of garden eels living in the sand that has built up against the stern of the ship. These shy little creatures look like a field of grass in the distance

but duck away as you approach them, leaving nothing but tiny holes in the sea floor, making photographing them a fun challenge.

When to visit

Diving in the area can be done all year round, however, from April to November the conditions are generally at their best, with great visibility and amazing marine life. Water temperatures range around 27-29°C, and temperatures do not drop as much as other areas of Bali so a 3mm suit is perfect.

Timing your trip right means you can combine your trip with some of Bali's other great dives such as the mola mola (sunfish) season in Nusa Penida from July to October. Nusa Penida is also one of the best places to see manta rays year round at the aptly named Manta Point and Manta Bay.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Bumphead parrotfish descending on *Liberty* wreck, late afternoon; Clown frogfish with colourful markings; Well-camouflaged soft coral crab; *Mexichromis multituberculata* nudibranch; Bright orange frogfish stands out against the dark sea floor; Spearing mantis shrimp

Getting there

With Bali being such a popular destination for tourists and backpackers from around the world, there are many flights landing in the island's main airport in Denpasar everyday, making getting there easy from most countries.

Tulamben is a three-hour drive from the airport; you can either take a taxi or arrange a pickup from the airport through your resort in advance. With spectacular views of the ocean, rice

paddies and if you are lucky, even a few monkeys, the drive is a mini adventure in itself, so have your camera to hand for any photo opportunities along the way. □

Nick Shallcross is a British underwater photographer based in the Gulf of Thailand. More of his work can be seen at www.nickshallcrossphotography.co.uk

Night dives and dawn dives are a must on the wreck, get up early to avoid the crowds, enjoy a nice long dive and be back at the resort in time for breakfast.

fact file



Bali, Indonesia



SOURCES: U.S. CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, WIKIPEDIA, D. SILCOCK

History Originally populated by Chinese migrants, the island of Bali has had a heavy influence from Chinese, Indian and Hindu cultures. The Dutch East India Company ruled Bali after their invasions of Indonesia in the 1800s, until World War II when the island fell to the hands of the Japanese. Shortly after the end of the war, Indonesia got its independence, which was officially recognized by the Dutch in 1949. Strife continued in Indonesia's unstable parliamentary democracy until President Soekarno declared martial law in 1957. Soekarno was removed from power following a fruitless coup in 1965 by alleged Communist sympathizers. President Suharto ruled Indonesia from 1966 until 1988. Suharto was toppled in 1998 following a round of riots, and in 1999, free and fair legislative elections took place. Indonesia is the world's third most populous democracy, Government: Republic. Capital: Jakarta.

Geography Located in Southeastern Asia, Indonesia is an archipelago situated between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. One of Indonesia's thousands of islands, Bali lies in the tropical Indo Pacific region, giving it huge ecological diversity. Mount Agung, Bali's highest point at 3,142m has shaped the island over the years

with its many volcanic eruptions. The 1963 eruption saw the death of thousands and the displacement of many others to other parts of Indonesia. Terrain consists primarily of coastal lowlands, with interior mountains on larger islands. Coastline: 54,716km.

Climate Tropical, hot and humid, with more moderate climate in the highlands. The water temperature is normally 28-29°C (84-86°F) year round, with an occasional "chilly" 27°C (82°F) spot. Most divers use 1mm neoprene suits. However, some people prefer 3mm.

Environmental issues Challenges include industrial waste water pollution, sewage, urban air pollution, deforestation, smoke and haze due to forest fires. Logging—the rainforests within the combined West Papua/Papua New Guinea land mass are second in size only to those of the Amazon, making it 'the lungs of Asia'. In 2001, there were 57 forest concession-holders in

operation around the country and untold other forest ventures operating illegally. Mining—tailings from copper, nickel, and gold mining are real threats.

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 chal-

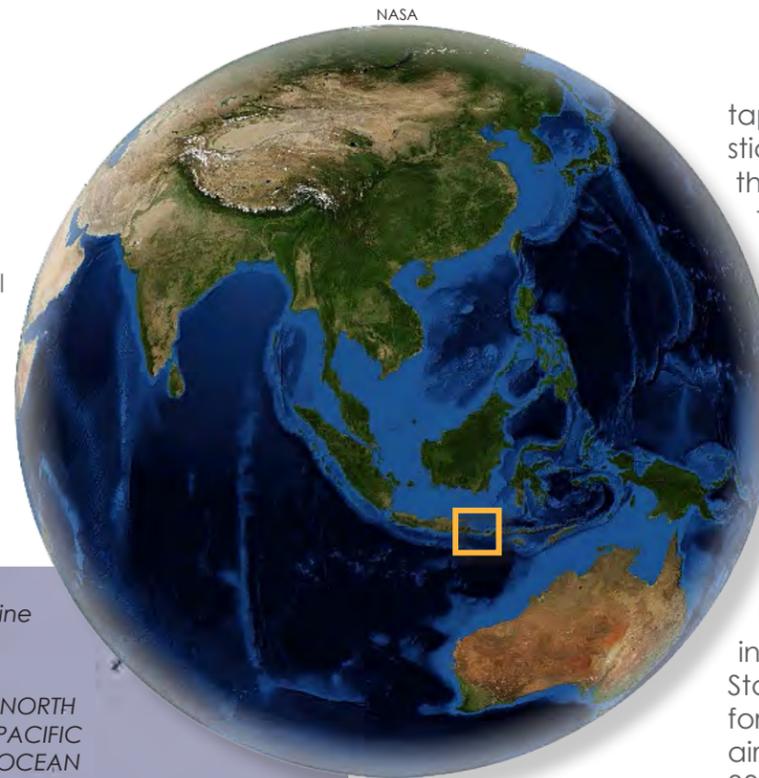
lenges of improving the country's insufficient infrastructure, labor unrest over wages, and high oil prices affecting fuel subsidy programs.

Currency The local currency is Indonesian Rupiah, although U.S. Dollars, Euros and Visa cards are also widely accepted around the island. ATM machines usually offer the best exchange rate and the use of traveller cheques is becoming harder except in the main banks. Exchange rates: 1EUR=16,071IDR; 1USD=11,811IDR; 1GBP=19,785IDR; 1AUD=10,946IDR; 1SGD= 9,398IDR

Hindu 1.8% (2000 census). Note: Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world. Visitors are encouraged to respect local traditions and dress modestly. Internet users: 20 million (2009)

Language Bahasa Indonesian is the official language, plus English, Dutch and local dialects are spoken. In tourist areas, English, Spanish and German are spoken.

Health There are no major health risks in this region of Bali. Stomach upsets can be common due to food and water, and it is not recommended to consume



RIGHT: Global map with location of Bali
BELOW: Location of Bali on map of Indonesia
BOTTOM RIGHT: Pair of ornate ghost pipefish



Population 251,160,124 (July 2013 est.) Ethnic groups: Javanese 40.6%, Sundanese 15%, Madurese 3.3%, Minangkabau 2.7%, Betawi 2.4%, Bugis 2.4%, Banten 2%, Banjar 1.7% (2000 census). Religions: Muslim 86.1%, Protestant 5.7%, Roman Catholic 3%,

tap water for health reasons, so stick to bottled water. Check with the WHO for up to date vaccination recommendations for the region.

Decompression chambers

Bali Hyperbaric Chamber, Sanglah Public Hospital, Jalan Diponegoro, Denpasar tel 62-361-227911

Travel/Visa/Security

For most nationalities, including the United Kingdom, United States and Australia, you pay for your Visa On Arrival at the airport at a cost of US\$25 for a 30-day tourist visa and a passport with at least six months validity is required. Bali has a history of terrorist attacks targeted at tourists, however the situation is much more stable and security is at a high level nowadays. It is worth noting that Bali has very strict laws on narcotics and extreme sentences apply to anyone caught in the possession of drugs.

Web sites

Indonesia Travel
www.indonesia.travel/en

