

DESTINATION

By  Tony Wu with contributions from Jez Tryner



THINK DIFFERENT

Alone once again in the brilliant blue of the tropical sea, sheltered from the current by a mountain of coral and stone. All is silent, but for the alternating sound of life-sustaining air filling my lungs, and the muffled gurgling of bubbles rushing to the surface, seeking liberation from this liquid realm.

A school of barracuda swims past, their seemingly effortless, streamlined glide a stark contrast to my stuttered finning. "If only I could swim like that." I thought, knowing full well that my aspirations of such elegant aquatic movement were but a fantasy.

My awkward finning was, in fact, all I could do to keep my position against the current ripping past the pinnacle in front of me. I looked to my right, then to my left, momentarily dislodging the regulator in my mouth, leaving a faint taste of brine on my lips.

"How do I get myself into these situations?" I wondered.

Conservation efforts in Bunaken National Park are paying off. Encounters with endangered Napoleon wrasse (*Cheilinus undulatus*) are becoming more common.

NORTH SULAWESI

It was shortly after 2:00 pm, and I was about 15 metres down at a site known as Sahaung I. It's a pinnacle, located just to the east of Bangka Island in North Sulawesi. It is, in fact, one of the most frequented dive sites in the area, because of the beautiful soft corals and sea fans that cover much of the submerged formation.

Prior to heading to the site, my guide had given me an appropriate heads-up: "There's going to be a strong current, and the sun will be on the other side. It's the wrong time to dive there."

Strong current, of course, meant that soft corals would be fully inflated, polyps working feverishly to snare nutrients from the passing water. So no big deal. And sun on the wrong side? Nonsense. There's always a way to make best use of available light. So off we went, the other visitors at the resort electing to skip the dive.

And sure enough, when we reached the site, there were no other divers, saner souls having elected to visit less challenging terrain that afternoon. So there we were, just the two of us hiding in the lee of the pinnacle, watching the occasional hapless little basslet get swept away by the force of the sea.

Things couldn't have been more perfect.

Trying to make headway against the current, a tiny nudibranch (*Thecacera sp.*) with a scrunched-up face



A row of sea fans surrounded by colourful fairy basslets sparkling like living gems in the tropical blue waters of North Sulawesi



a. Early morning light on tropical flower
 b. Manado Tua in the background
 c. Harlequin shrimp (*Hymenocera elegans*)
 d. Ribbon eel (*Rhinomuraena quaesita*)



NORTH WHERE?

If you've been diving for a while, or perhaps even if you haven't, you've probably heard of names like Manado, Bunaken and the Lembeh Strait. Over the years, these destinations have deservedly joined the ranks of the most desirable and sought-after dive destinations on the planet.

But North Sulawesi?

Actually, the term North Sulawesi refers to the tip of the peninsula at the northern end of Sulawesi Island, which is one of the main islands in the Indonesian

archipelago. North Sulawesi is one of 32 provinces in the Republic of Indonesia, with the capital city being Manado.

The entire region is blessed with a variety of natural treasures, among which are some of the most pristine and beautiful underwater environments in the world. The well-known dive destinations of Manado, Bunaken and the Lembeh Strait are all part of North Sulawesi.

One of the reasons that this area is so rich in marine life is its prime location. To the north and west is the Celebes Sea, and to the south and east is the

Molucca Sea. Like the rest of Indonesia, the area is volcanic, and underwater, there are deep trenches nearby. Where there are trenches, the water is usually rich with nutrients, meaning an abundance of life, from microscopic critters to majestic cetaceans.

The hospitable climate also helps. The North Sulawesi area has a balmy tropical climate with a comfortable average temperature of 26°C or so.

Humidity can be high, but that's to be expected in the tropics. Northwesterly winds run from November to March, bringing a greater chance of precipitation, with April to October having relatively less rain.

For divers, the practical net effect of all this is that the waters here are teeming with life, and diving is possible all year round, which is why North Sulawesi attracts scuba enthusiasts from around the world 365 days a year.

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Peeking out from a discarded tin can, this adorable long-spine pufferfish (*Diodon holocanthus*) looks just like ET's long-lost twin.

OFF THE BEATEN PATH

One of the reasons I was battling the current to take photos of soft coral was my never-ending quest to find places that are off the beaten path. With thousands of divers visiting North Sulawesi annually, "off the beaten path" would seem a contradiction in terms.

Surprisingly, it's not.

When I got to thinking about it, over the past ten years or so, I'd only ever dived around Manado, Bunaken and the Lembeh Strait, which is probably true

for 90% or more of the divers who've been to the area. In fact, there are more than enough fantastic dive sites in these places to keep most divers busy and happy for dozens, if not hundreds, of dives.

Geographically, Manado and Bunaken are on the western side of the North Sulawesi peninsula, while the Lembeh Strait is to the east, adjacent to the port of Bitung.

West. East. Wait a second. What about the north?



- a. Kasawari Lembeh Resort
- b. Pygmy seahorse (*Hippocampus denise*)
- c. Porcelain crab (*Neopetrolisthes maculatus*)
- d. Frogfish (*Antennarius sp.*) "fishing" for food

To the north are Talise, Gangga and Bangka Islands, as well as quite a bit of the Sulawesi coastline — unexplored territory, for me at least.

So in planning this trip, I made arrangements to visit the north, and I found exactly what I had hoped for — few divers, excellent diving, and unique underwater scenery.

The first thing you notice is the white sand beaches. North Sulawesi is famous for fantastic critters, unrivalled muck-diving and beautiful reefs, but only occasionally does anyone associate the area with pristine white sand. Go north, and there's no shortage of these idyllic beaches. Except for a few boutique resorts, most of the white-sand expanses are uninhabited, unless of course you include the resident populations of mischievous monkeys.

Then there's the underwater scenery, which is also unique. The pinnacle at Sahaung I stands out for its plush orange and red soft corals that puff up to filter food from the water. Other nearby areas nurture all sorts of macro subjects, from pygmy seahorses to comical little frogfish. There are coral areas, muck areas, beach areas, sandy areas, rocky areas...you get the idea.

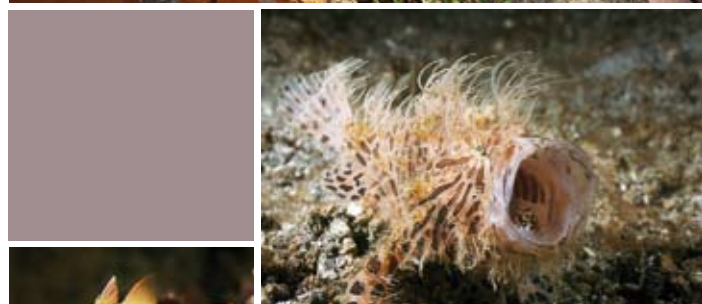
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Something for Everyone



Just a short hop away from Singapore via regular flights on SilkAir, North Sulawesi is one of the world's premier dive destinations.

On the western side of the North Sulawesi peninsula is Bunaken National Park, which features dramatic dropoffs, unspoiled reefs and regular encounters with turtles, napoleons and other big animals. The park has received a number of international awards for the efforts of local communities and dive operators to preserve the marine environment. There's a small entrance fee to dive in the park, which goes toward helping these conservation efforts.

Also on the western side are dive sites near and around Manado, as well as other islands — Siladen, Manado Tua, Mantehage and Nain. You can stay on Bunaken, as well as the very nice resort on Siladen. In short, there are plenty of sites from which to choose, and dive guides in the area are generally well informed about site conditions, so they'll take you to wherever looks best at the time.

On the eastern side of the peninsula, sandwiched between the mainland and Lembeh Island, is a narrow body of water known as the Lembeh Strait. Since the first resort opened here in the 1990s, this area has become world-renowned for muck diving. Topside, the Strait isn't much to look at, but once you're underwater, you'll be treated to all manner of strange and seemingly alien critter. If you're a fan of muck diving and haven't been to Lembeh, this is a must-do.

To the north lie Talise, Gangga and Bangka Islands, which are undoubtedly the least visited parts of North Sulawesi. Featuring white sand beaches, hot springs and relatively few visitors, this area has both vibrant reef communities and excellent muck diving. If you've visited other parts of North Sulawesi before, consider a trip to this area to explore new waters.

And even further north, close to the Philippines, is the Sangihe Talaud district, which comprises 77 islands, of which 56 are inhabited. Liveaboard trips are the only practical way to access this frontier area.

Whatever you fancy — diving a world-famous marine park, relaxing at a nice resort, hunting for unusual critters or exploring relatively undived waters, North Sulawesi has it all.

- | | |
|----|--|
| a. | Walkway at Murex Dive Resort |
| b. | If you'd like to see a hairy frogfish (<i>Antennarius striatus</i>), the Lembeh Strait is a good place to look. |
| c. | Cardinalfish (<i>Apogon sealei</i>) |
| d. | The inviting pool at Hotel Santika, where Thalassa Dive Center is based |
| e. | Beautiful secluded white sand beaches characterise the northern islands. |
| f. | Inquisitive mantis shrimp (<i>Odontodactylus latirostris</i>) |



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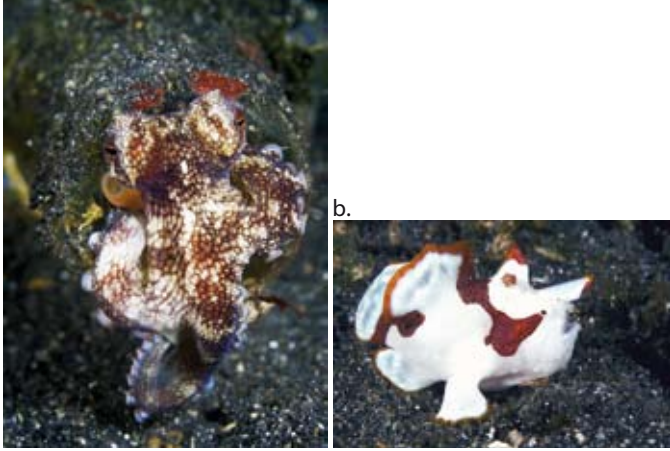
Gorgeous, healthy sea fans like this are plentiful in the waters around Gangga and Bangka Islands.



One of my more memorable dives was in front of a fishing village on the southern side of Bangka, a place we went because the seas were a bit too choppy to visit the usual sites.

It wasn't a "marked" site per se, but wow did it deliver. I chose to spend the entire dive with a hunting barracuda, which ended up tolerating my presence and even yawning once to show me its impressive set of teeth. Despite its magnificently sharp canines, my elongated aquatic friend wasn't a terribly talented predator. I watched as it stalked, struck and missed at least a half a dozen fish. I guess even apex predators have off days.

My, my, Mr. Barracuda,
what sharp teeth you have!



a. Octopus in a bottle
b. Juvenile clown frogfish
(*Antennarius maculatus*)
c. Snowflake moray eel
(*Echidna nebulosa*)



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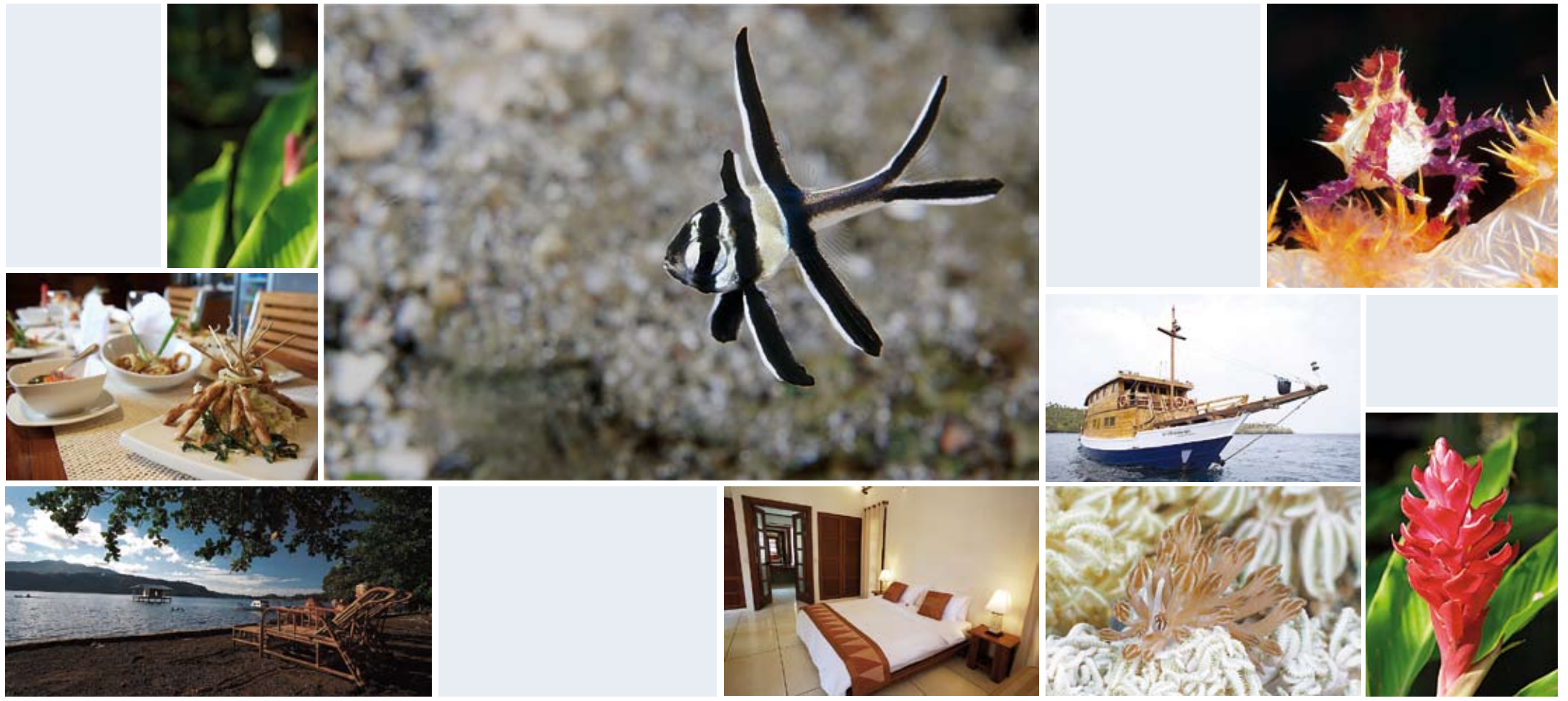
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		b.		d.
a.			c.	
e.		f.	g.	

- a. Fantastic food aboard the Adventurer I
- b. Juvenile Banggai cardinalfish (*Pterapogon kauderni*)
- c. Liveaboard vessel Adventurer I
- d. Soft coral crab (*Hoplophrys oatesii*)
- e. The view from Two Fish Lembeh
- f. Villa interior at Kasawari Lembeh Resort
- g. Well-camouflaged nudibranch (*Phylloidesmium sp.*)

What's New



There's no shortage of options when it comes to accommodation and diving in North Sulawesi, with facilities and services to suit every budget and preference. In recent months, there have been a few notable additions.

Two Fish Divers, owned and operated by ever-friendly Nigel and Tina Thomas, recently opened a new resort in Lembeh to complement their resort on Bunaken Island.

Situated in a secluded private bay on Lembeh Island, Two Fish Lembeh is just minutes from the Strait's best sites. The ambiance is relaxed and low key. Personalised service is key, with a maximum of three divers per guide and six at the resort at any time.

Also new in the Strait is Kasawari Lembeh Resort, which is located next to Jahir, one of Lembeh's prime dive sites. This resort accommodates a maximum of 20 divers, and has been designed specifically to cater to the unique needs of photographers and videographers — look forward to having large rinse tanks, a spacious camera room and custom-built racks for your camera gear on the boats. To top it off, the resort's villas are luxurious and comfortable, the perfect place to pamper yourself after a long day of diving.

The Adventurer I is a new boutique liveaboard specialising in the Lembeh Strait. With a maximum of eight passengers, this boat's unique feature is a "dive whenever, wherever and however you want" philosophy. There are no fixed schedules, meaning you can board and depart from the Adventurer whenever you want, and you can dive any of Lembeh's sites whenever you feel like. No fixed times. No hassles.

Over on the Manado side, Sedona Hotels International has just launched a new 5-star hotel, the first international-class tourist facility in North Sulawesi. If you're looking for a bit of pampering, or if there are non-divers in your family who'd appreciate a nice spa treatment or relaxing poolside drink while you're out for a dive, Sedona might be just what you need. Diving services at the resort are run by Euro Divers, who manage scuba facilities in a number of other popular dive destinations worldwide.

Finally, you can explore a bit of the northern frontier of Sulawesi with Minahasa Divers, run by Katiman Herlambang, a long-time veteran of the Sulawesi dive scene. Minahasa Divers is based in Manado, but has also recently started trips to the northern coast of Sulawesi to explore some of the less well-known areas.



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Remember to look in the shallows, where you might come across busy little jawfish (*Opistognathus sp.*) like this one cleaning its burrow.

NORTH SULAWESI

Two colourful cleaner shrimp (*Stenopus tenuirostris*) attending to mantis shrimp (*Lysiosquilla sp.*)



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M a n a d o

NAILING THE SHOT

I signalled to Harry, my guide and buddy for the dive, that I was going to venture into the current. After scanning the area, I selected a spot with plenty of soft coral, which happened also to be perfectly positioned against the bright afternoon sun.

So off I went, finning like crazy to get into position. A few minutes and many huffs and puffs later, I got what I wanted — images of plush soft corals. It's not that you don't see soft corals in other parts of North Sulawesi. It's just that there are so many around certain parts of Bangka that the soft corals are arguably the signature feature of the area.

And photographically, the warm red and orange tones of the coral make for perfect contrast to the backdrop of tropical blue water.

- a. Nudibranch (*Chromodoris dianae*) with attitude
- b. Pretty mating pair (*Hypselodoris bullocki*)

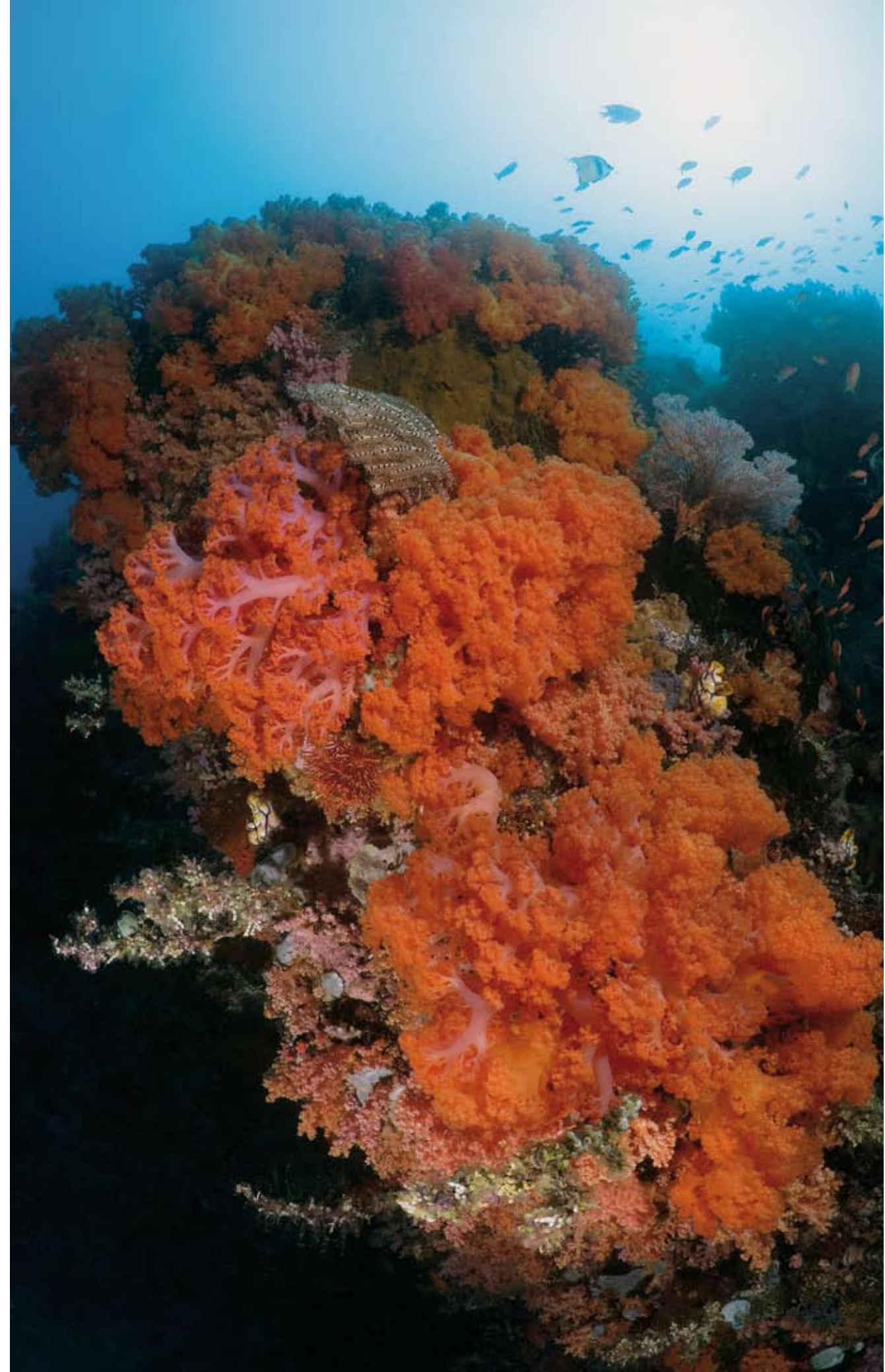


a.



b.

Plush soft corals like this cover the Sahaung I dive site near Bangka Island.





a. Large barrel sponges adorn the reef.
 b. Close-up of a lionfish antenna
 c. Clown frogfish (*Antennarius maculatus*) saying ahhhhhhh!

As we slowly surfaced in the water column, pausing for the requisite safety stop, I stopped to observe and appreciate the vibrant, healthy reef community below. Angelfish, barracuda, basslets, parrotfish, sea fans, soft coral — you name it. Everything was there.

Back on the boat, I thanked Harry for helping me to visit the site at the “wrong” time. No one else was around, the corals were in full bloom, and the sun was just right.

Sometimes it pays to “Think Different”. ☺

SPECIAL THANKS to the following parties for their assistance in preparing this feature: SilkAir, Nemo Travel, Archipelago Resorts & Fleet, Eco Divers, Gangga Island Resort & SPA, Kasawari Lembeh Resort, Minahasa Divers, Murex Dive Resorts & Liveboards, Thalassa Dive Center and Two Fish Divers.

For more about North Sulawesi, see Tony’s blog (www.tonywublog.com) and Jez’s post on the FiNS blog (www.finsonline.com/blog/fins).

FROM THE AUTHORS



Tony Wu

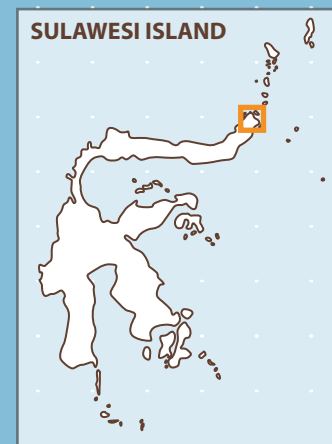
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INDONESIA



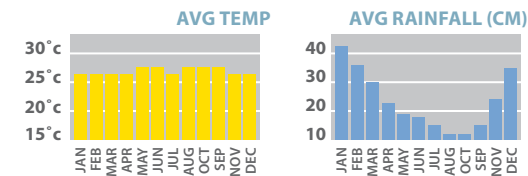
FACT FILE



SilkAir operates regular flights between Singapore and Manado. Check www.silkair.com for the latest flight schedules. Local flights via Jakarta and Bali are also available.



Diving is possible throughout the year. Water temperatures are generally warm. A 3 mm suit or equivalent should be sufficient, though divers planning an extended stay in the Lembeh Strait may wish to consider a 5 mm suit and a hood, as water temperatures in the Strait are generally lower than elsewhere.



Passports must be valid for at least six months. Citizens of some Asian countries are eligible for visa-free entry. Visas for entry to Indonesia for many other nationalities are available upon arrival. Ensure that you have at least one empty page in your passport for visa upon arrival. Current visa on arrival fee is US\$25 for a stay of more than three days. Departure tax for international flights is Rp 75,000, which must be paid in local currency at the airport.



GSM coverage is generally good throughout North Sulawesi. Internet connectivity is not widely available. Some resorts provide internet facilities, and it is possible to access the iPass network via non-local numbers.



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PLUGS



Indonesian Rupiah. US\$ also accepted under some circumstances. Generally tipping is not practiced, but porters at the airport will expect Rupiah 5,000 for each bag they handle.



There are no vaccinations required, but it is advisable to take along insect repellent.



GMT + 8 hrs

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