

: ALAN WIGGS

# BUNAKENS BEST KePT secret

> BUNAKEN MARINE PARK HAS LONG BEEN REGARDED AS AN EPICENTRE OF BIODIVERSITY WITH UNMATCHED EQUATORIAL AND TROPICAL MARINE LIFE THRIVING IN THE RICH CURRENTS THAT WASH THE CORAL SLOPES AND WALLS OF THE ISLAND GROUP. MANADO AND BUNAKEN ISLAND ARE WELL KNOWN, BUT THERE'S ALSO A TINY ISLAND PARADISE RINGED BY CORAL SAND BEACHES IN THE MARINE PARK OVERLOOKED BY THE IMPRESSIVE 800-METRE VOLCANIC CONE OF MANADO TUA.



- One of the dive boats on a typically glassy calm morning – offshore the water drops into the Manado trench to over 1500 metres.
- A saddled pufferfish does the dazed and confused routine on the Tiwoho night dive.
- An attractive juvenile spotfin lionfish.
- One of the masters of camouflage, a male robust ghostpipefish.

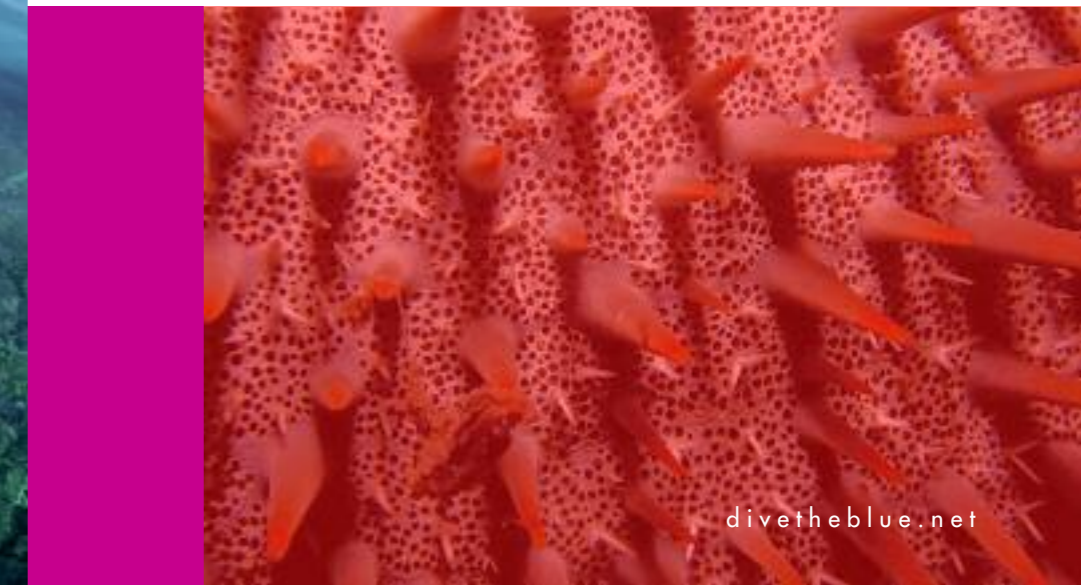
Day One brought a glassy calm sea, conditions we'd soon accept as 'normal' for the area. As we breakfasted the dive staff collected gear from our beachside villas, bagging, tagging and assembling scuba sets, and organising the boats. Our first dive was to be a chance to trim buoyancy and get acquainted with the local conditions at Alung Bana, a sheltered site on the southern shores of Bunaken Island.

Like most sites in the park, there was a steep reef slope falling into inky depths. Entering the 29°C water, I was glad I opted for the thermo-lycra suit, as anything heavier would be excessive! First impressions were, "Wow...this is different diving...!" There was a proliferation of vase, chimney and barrel sponges, and yellow tunicates and red seaweeds were everywhere. I had opted for a basic camera rig but soon regretted this, as various chromodorid nudibranchs and soft coral crabs dotted the dive site. The value of the dive guides was quickly realised – they found stuff we'd never have seen. Each dive guide had a pointer to show the tiniest of critters to the disbelieving divers around them. More than once I thought... "What the ???" only to find yet

another species of totally unfamiliar crab materialise! But seeing a pygmy seahorse on that first dive was unforgettable.

Surface interval, a tank change as the boat moved to nearby Lekuan 1 – massive green sea turtles moved in slow motion as they ascended for a lazy breath before returning to their favourite ledge for a snooze. The reef slope streamed with pyramid butterflyfish while the sunlight on the reef crest above reflected the confetti colours of basslets and damselfish. After 30 years diving in the tropics I thought I had it covered, but the range of life was amazing – five or six clownfish species; countless butterfly and angelfish. Each dive posed as many questions as it gave answers and ended with books being scoured to match names to creatures.

The best snorkelling on the island was at Siladen House Reef, a five minute walk away through the nearby fishing village; the magnificent beach had a rickety wooden jetty ending above a pristine hard coral wall. The snorkelling was outstanding, with many lionfish, spinecheek anemonefish; long toms and Moorish idols present. I'd always thought the glorious blue-girdled angelfish was





Top to bottom:

- My daughter Georgia photographing a young green sea turtle emerging from its resting place at Mike's Point.

- This handsome specimen is a 'comet fish', they are very secretive and rarely seen during daylight hours.

- A rather handsome moray amongst the healthy hard corals at Mike's Point.

- This hairy decorator crab wandered over an unusual anemone – it appeared to be growing its own crop of seaweed.

- The scribbled filefish is a gorgeous creation – here nuzzling into the large polyps and sponges on the Tiwoho night dive.



unusual, but here they were common. And never have we seen so many flutemouths and trumpetfish – often they'd shadow larger fish, using them as cover while they hunted the reef garden. Siladen House Reef was also a brilliant boat dive. Gorgonians and soft corals thrived in the nutrient rich current as blue trevally swept by swiftly, rounding up fusiliers. Large pelagics aren't a major drawcard here, but there's enough larger life forms for even fussy divers – this is certainly not a 'macro only' type dive destination – far from it. You can expect to see the odd white tip reef shark, blue spotted and eagle rays and we saw schooling barracuda, big eye and giant trevally on a few dives. The reef plateau also had herds of grazing giant bumphead parrotfish and Napoleon wrasse – but you only see them if you tear your eyes away from the amazing life crowding every square metre of these reefs.

Raymond's Point was one of those confused current dives, where divers found lateral and vertical currents to keep them focussed. I've seen Sea Whips and Gorgonian forests before, but this was something quite special – crinoids clung to candy-coloured sponges and fans as we blazed by in the flow. Vermillion seawhips flailed in the current and an endless procession of red tooth triggerfish disappeared beyond view. Deep in a ledge I spied a mass of white dots that gradually materialised into an amazing double-ended fish – clearly a tropical relative of southern Australia's blue devilfish (*paraplesiops* sp.) After a couple of quick exposures, it turned tail and fled into its hole, leaving its long rounded tail waving in a convincing impression of a spotted leopard moray – bizarre! It was later identified as a Comet fish – very secretive and rarely seen during daylight hours. Even less noticeable was the leaf scorpionfish pointed out by our guide Noldy. This was a magnificent and breathtaking dive.

Ditto for Mike's Point – found at the north-west corner of Bunaken; well-known underwater photographer Mike Severns – spent so much time at this excellent wall, the dive guides eventually named it after him. Here we saw most of the larger pelagics, as well as unusually large schools of batfish and sea bass. Banded sea kraits, moray eels, blue spotted stingrays and the ubiquitous green sea turtles were but a few highlights on a

brilliant and diverse dive. A quintet of razorfish escorted us back to the ladder swimming with amazing synchronicity.

One typically still evening, we followed Jean-Loup's advice and opted for a night dive before dinner at Tiwoho on the mainland. Within minutes we were surrounded by gorgonians streaked with basketstars and crinoids and the flash was running hot. Nudibranchs everywhere, robust and ornate ghost pipefish; banded coral shrimp, boxer and porcelain crabs; and elusive banded pipefish all kept photographers busy. Scribbled filefish blundered into anemones while Moorish idols and racoon butterflyfish drifted about in their nocturnal camouflage. Noldy pointed out a weird hairy decorator crab which looked like it was growing its own coat of seaweed – the only thing giving it away was the bright red eye stalks! Tropical

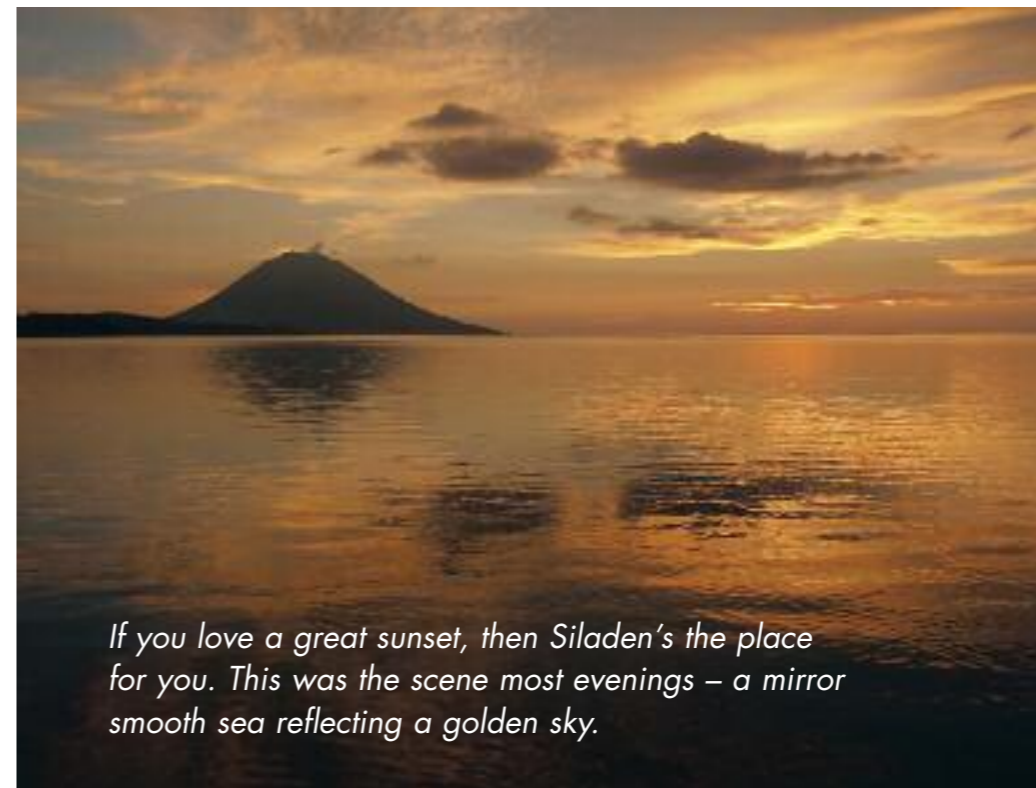


night dives can sometimes lack colour, but this was entirely different!

We also dived at Manado Tua in the shadow of the 800 metre high volcano – the spectacular scenery alone makes this journey a must. Most dive sites are within 10-15 minutes of the resort and you can do a double dive and be back for lunch around 12:30pm. Up to five dives a day are offered and the dive guides never miss a chance to get underwater – night dives, mandarinfish dives and extended day trips to Nain and the Bangka Islands are also available.

Left: This coral rockcod emerged briefly from his lair only to be dazzled by the strobe.

Right: *Diadema* sea urchins were abundant on the Tiwoho nightdive.



If you love a great sunset, then Siladen's the place for you. This was the scene most evenings – a mirror smooth sea reflecting a golden sky.

## TRAVEL FACT FILE

### Getting there

The city of Manado has an international airport with services to Singapore (4 weekly flights operated by Silk Air), Kuala Lumpur (3 weekly connections) and Taiwan, plus domestic connections to Jakarta (non-stop and via Makassar), Surabaya and Bali via Makassar. The Island is approximately 45 minutes by boat from Manado.

### Climate and Weather

Siladen is at its best from early March to late November. In other periods of the year there may be seasonal rain showers. In July we had daytime temperatures up to 31°C with surprisingly low humidity. Hot at times but quite pleasant. Evenings were also very warm – the airconditioning was very welcome. Water temperatures vary throughout from 27° to 29°C.

### Currency

The official currency is the Rupiah. The rate of exchange is approximately 1US\$ = 8,200 Rp. or 1 Euro = 12,000 Rp. The resort accepts Rupiah, Euro and US Dollars. Exchange rates are published every day at the reception.

### Electricity

The Resort runs on 220 volt electricity (24/7) with standard European 2 round pin electricity plugs.

### Internet

Wireless internet access is available in all common areas of Siladen Island Resort.

### Vaccination

There are no vaccinations required.

### Documents and Visas

Starting February 1, 2004 the Indonesian Government has introduced a VISA program for visitors. This is payable only as \$US25 cash on arrival at Manado. Double check your passport has a minimum validity of 6 months.

### Airport Taxes

Visitors to Indonesia are required to pay departure taxes at the airport. The departure tax for domestic travel is 20,000 Rp; the tax for international departures is 70,000 Rp. Yes – you pay \$US on the way in but rupiah in the way out!!!



## THE RESORT:



Siladen Island Resort and Spa has six dive guides; a top-notch instructor; 3 dive boats with countless deck hands; a well equipped dive shop; 70 x 12 litre tanks and PADI courses to Divemaster level. This is a comprehensive dive operation with 40 sites nearby, and diving is the main activity. The Spa operation offers aromatherapy massages, various skin and beauty treatments. Sipping ginger tea overlooking Manado Tua after a coconut scrub massage is pretty special.



Accommodation features huge stylish bungalows with every possible convenience including four poster king size beds, airconditioning plus very practical and spacious private outdoor bathrooms. The bungalows are built in Minahasa-style (local wood construction) with their own private verandahs with day beds, couches and beach lounges. Each is in lush tropical gardens with bamboo fences giving privacy. The large pool with



sunken bar is the hub of the resort and is overlooked by the bar, lounge, library, pool table area and a beautifully appointed restaurant.

Meals are superb. The manager, Donald Silverberg is ex-Sheraton and the lavish buffets offer a variety of western and local options. Twice during our stay the dining room was set up on the beach, and we dined al fresco with a memorable beach barbecue and sunset.

Other activities include dolphin cruises; village visits; volcano treks; whitewater rafting plus numerable other options on the mainland at Manado. A highlight of the area is the Tangkoko Rainforest trek, but this involves a 2.5 hour bus trip each way – we did another couple of dives instead! Maybe next year...

> **LINK:** [www.siladen.com](http://www.siladen.com)

*Top to bottom: The outdoor private bathroom proved to be stylish, practical, and pretty cool! The beachfront villas have every possible convenience. The large freeform saltwater pool is central to the restaurant, lounge, and bar area.*