

THE AQUARAZZI ADVENTURE

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> DURING AUGUST 2010 A GROUP OF INTREPID UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHERS FROM WESTERN AUSTRALIAN DIVERS ESCAPED THE COLD PERTH WINTER FOR THE WARMTH OF BALI. OVER THREE WEEKS WE MADE OUR WAY TO TULAMBEN TO EXPLORE THE USAT LIBERTY WRECK AND MANY OTHER FABULOUS SITES IN THE AREA.

Tulamben is in northeast Bali, about a 3.5 hour drive from Denpasar. It's roughly 70km as the crow flies from the international airport, but the roads are narrow and full of trucks and motorbikes, which make for a slow and interesting drive winding around the mountains and down into Tulamben. This small village nestles in the shadows of Mount Agung, a dormant volcano.

Diving the *Liberty* is simply a matter of gearing up on the beach, walking into the warm waters and descending the black sand slope towards the wreck. Visibility we experienced averaged around 15m. Descending to the wreck, the volcanic rocks give way to black volcanic sand. At first glance this site, as

with all others in the area, looks lifeless, but this is an illusion. Suddenly you see something – then something else – and the site just comes alive.

On my first dive on the *Liberty* our guide Wayan showed us all sorts of macro life as we descended the slope. We came across a small clump of soft coral in the black sand and hiding in the tentacles was a small crab. I spent a few minutes taking photos then Wayan motioned to me to look up. The stern and the rudder loomed towards me and two large humpheaded wrasse, floating motionlessly, stared at me. I remember saying to myself "Wow!" and I nearly dropped my second stage from my mouth – this sure beats diving the Rockingham Wreck Trail!

At this stage we were about 25m down in visibility close to 15m. Wayan led us over and around the wreck to the bow and once there we turned and went back the other way, slowly taking in the view of the wreck as we swam past. Words can't describe what I saw. The wreck is covered in many varieties of hard and soft corals, gorgonian seafans, anemones with resident clownfish and many species of fish. Above the wreck was a huge school of silver jacks. The maximum depth of the wreck is about 30m.

Far too soon it was time to leave the wreck and we slowly headed for shore with a safety stop on the way. When I surfaced Wayan looked over and asked "Good?". My reply was a huge grin, I was lost for words. I remember thinking surely it doesn't get any better than this – boy, was I wrong!

Once on shore we took our gear off and walked back to the dive shop while the porters carried our gear. Back at the shop Wayan told us the second dive would be at a site called 'Coral Gardens', so we headed off for breakfast and prepared for

Main: Coral trout and cleaner shrimps at Coral Gardens.
Bottom left to right: Leopard moray eel at a cleaner station, Seraya Secrets; Feather stars, Liberty Wreck; Lionfish, Coral Gardens; Soft coral crab, Liberty Wreck.



Left top to bottom: Soft corals, Liberty Wreck; Anemone and anemone fish, The Drop Off; Coral trout, Seraya Secrets; Sunrise over the Liberty Wreck.

Right top to bottom: Feather star and corals, Liberty Wreck; Frogfish (?), Liberty Wreck; Moray eel and cleaner shrimps, Coral Gardens; Mantis shrimp, Liberty Wreck.

our second dive. At the agreed time we were at the shop suited up and made the short walk down to the entry point where our gear was already waiting. We finished kitting up, entered the water, made a quick final check and were on our way.

Shortly after descending we came across two man-made structures of steel rods. One is dome shaped and the other is in the shape of an aeroplane. These have been made to assist in attracting corals and fish to the area. Again this site is mostly black sand broken up by clumps of rocks with corals.

At about 24m we came across a shrimp cleaning station with a moray eel and a couple of coral groupers. We took turns to take shots, and enjoyed watching the groupers push their way in for a clean.

After the cleaning station we made our way along the black sand slope, and

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came across a blue ribbon eel with its body extended from its hole. A couple more quick shots and we moved off with Wayan pointing out all sorts of creatures. A large part of the slope was now covered in various soft corals.

The third dive of the day was at the 'Drop Off'. The entry is a short walk further around the bay to the end of the point. Once you descend the slope, your guide

heads towards the point where you turn and make your way back along the wall in the direction you just came from. The wall is full of coral and large gorgonian fans. Wayan made his way to one in particular and gestured to me to take a look. As I floated staring at the gorgonian, I wondered what he was making a fuss about. Then I saw it – a pygmy seahorse! Now I knew these little fellows were small, but I didn't realise they were that small! We slowly made our way back exploring every part of the wall, with Wayan finding many fascinating creatures – many so small it gives a new meaning to macro. After 50 minutes the dive was over. What a top day of diving.

The second day started at the dive shop at 6:30am. It was decided to dive the *Liberty* wreck before the day trippers arrived followed by two dives at Seraya. We were into the water by 7:00am. After another brilliant 50 minute dive, we surfaced for breakfast and prep for Seraya. Our guide that day (and the rest of the time I was there) was Nyoman. Julius (one of the Aquarazzi), Brenton from South Australia and Erwin from Belgium joined us.

Seraya is about 10 minutes by mini bus south of Tulamben. I'd heard and read a lot about Seraya's 'secrets' and was keen to see for myself. Nyoman explained that we'd do the left hand side of the site first and then the right hand side as the second dive after a surface interval. The entry/exit here is the same as Tulamben, with volcanic rock lining the shore followed by black volcanic sand down the slope. At first I thought we had the wrong place as there was nothing but black sand, then we came upon a small clump of coral. Nothing spectacular –

The *Liberty* was built near the end of WWI, launched on 19 June 1918, then commissioned in October that year. She was approximately 125m long with a beam of 17m, a draft of 8m and a displacement of 13,130 tons. She was decommissioned on 7 May 1919 and returned to the US Shipping Board (USSB). In 1939 at the outbreak of WWII the *Liberty* was owned by the US Maritime Commission, successor to the USSB, and employed by the Southgate-Nelson Corporation. In November 1940 the *Liberty* was one of several ships taken up by the US Army for defence service and at the time of the USA's entry into WWII the *USAT Liberty* (as she was now known) was operating in the Pacific. In January 1942, the *Liberty* was travelling between Australia and the Philippines with a cargo of railway parts and rubber. At 04:15am 11 January 1942, the *Liberty* was torpedoed by the Japanese submarine the *I-166* about 19km southwest of Lombok Strait. There were no fatalities and she was taken into tow by two of the convoy's escorts towards the town of Singaraja in northern Bali. But, the *Liberty* was taking in too much water so it was decided to beach her near the village of Tulamben and salvage her cargo. Over the ensuing years the local villagers scavenged the *Liberty* for many bits and pieces, and used her as a fishing platform. The *Liberty* was beached until 1963 when Mt Agung erupted and the tremors caused her to move and sink into deeper water just off shore. She's now on her starboard side on a black sand slope about 30m offshore in 9-30m. The water temp averages a comfortable 28°C, but I advise wearing a full length Lycra stinger suit or a 3mm wetsuit, mainly to protect against coral and other stings, or from cuts on the rocks or the wreck itself.

until Nyoman pointed out two ornate ghost pipefish. I'd never seen these guys before and was stunned. They were small and absolutely amazing. Suddenly there's one incredible creature after another, and the whole dive is full of surprises. There was a shrimp cleaning station with a large leopard moray eel. There were blue ribbon eels plus masses of other macro life. Fifty minutes later we surfaced, changed tanks and took a break. After about 90 minutes we followed Nyoman into the right hand side of the site. This was exactly the same as the previous dive, and words can not do it justice. Seraya really did live up to its reputation.

The next few days had the same routine; an early dive around 6:30am then breakfast, a mid morning dive, lunch, then an afternoon dive. One day we took a small boat ride to Allamanda Reef, which is just off shore but reached only by boat. Allamanda is covered in hard and soft corals and is probably more suited to wide angle than macro. However Nyoman found us a gorgonian fan and pointed out some pygmy seahorses. This site was just as good as every other we saw. Over the six days I averaged three dives a day, but could have done at least five, with one later in the afternoon and a night dive.





I stayed and dived with Tulamben Wreck Divers (TWD) and can not highly recommend them enough. It is a very professional operation run by Tony Medcraft and his partner Wayan. The accommodation consists of basic through to luxury rooms, located either at the resort itself or at the villas - a short motorcycle ride away - and are very well valued. Breakfast is included with the price and a lovely meal sets you up for the rest of the day. The resort is neat and tidy with a great pool and is a short walk from the dive sites and the restaurants in town.

All the TWD dive guides are excellent and know the sites very well. If you want to see something or spend a little more time photographing, just let them know and they will accommodate you. They have your gear ready to go before each dive and make sure it is at the site before you get there. They help you gear up and to enter/exit the water, in particular when the swell is up a bit. Most of all they're friendly and enjoy a laugh, so take the time to sit down and talk with them.

There's no night life to speak of in Tulamben. Several resorts have their own restaurants, as well as a number of restaurants located along the street. The food is mostly Balinese and is very tasty – you can't leave without trying a Balinese pancake! At night we gathered in a restaurant as a group and talked diving and photography, ate a great meal and had a couple of drinks – life doesn't get much simpler than that.

I can highly recommend TWD and the diving in Tulamben. If you haven't been there yet, put it on your to-do list – you won't regret it.



The *Liberty* wreck is very popular with day trippers coming up from Denpasar and on some days there would be easily in excess of 300 divers congregating around the entry/exit point or in the water, so if diving with crowds is not your thing then staying in Tulamben overnight allows you to dive the wreck first thing in the morning or late in the afternoon when the day trippers have headed home.

LINK> www.tulambenwreckdivers.com ■