

sunfish sunfish everywhere

MOSTLY MISUNDERSTOOD BY DIVERS, BALI PROVIDES SPECTACULAR DIVING AND IS THE PREFERRED ANNUAL DESTINATION FOR ONE OF THE BIGGEST, WEIRDEST FISH ON EARTH - THE MOLA MOLA!

:: TEXT BY DOT MEDCRAFT, PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY MEDCRAFT

THIS STORY IS A ONE-OFF, THE SPECIAL EXPERIENCE. IT HAPPENED AT THE END OF A GRUELLING, ALBEIT REWARDING, WHALE SHARK SEASON AT NINGALOO REEF IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA. IN SEMI-RETIREMENT TONY AND I HEADED OFF TO BALI FOR SOME WELL DESERVED R&R, BUT WITH THE TIMING JUST RIGHT TO COMPLETE (WE HOPED) ONE OF OUR LAST DIVING WISHES.

On arrival we made a bee-line to Nusa Lembongan – 15 minutes sailing from Benoa Harbour, Kuta – to dive with the big sunfish. These strange creatures have only been seen by a handful of divers worldwide - not much is known of their habits and finding them is very much hit and miss. We did know, however, that at a certain time of year they often materialise off the coral reefs of Nusa Lembongan and, this year, we'd timed it just right for the very first time!

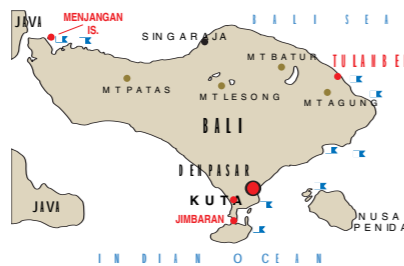
During the last 20 years or so of our diving we'd always wanted to complete the 'Big Five'; diving with the biggest shark (whale sharks), cruising with manta rays, encountering the leviathan humpback whale, coming face to face with the great white shark and an opportunity to swim with the reclusive, elusive sunfish. Having had the luck to accomplish the first four, despite a gruelling business schedule, we arrived in Bali on 22 June with our hopes high.

The very next day we headed out on Bali-Hai's big catamaran to Nusa Lembongan in the capable hands of Michael Cortenbach's professional diving team. Eagerly we



chatted to the dive crew gathering what sunfish info we could. Were we to be lucky? We never faltered even when they told us no sunfish had been sighted in two days.

Tony bragged to all and sundry about his 'special contacts' and how it was certain the fish would appear, he had it all organised! Not the least bit convinced, the crew just laughed politely. Tony and I said a silent prayer and crossed our fingers.



Transferring to the small 'Serendipity' dive boat, we geared up, listened to a very

detailed briefing and prepared to dive. Six divers plus our guide, Toto, leapt into the water at Blue Corner and swam full pelt into the current down to the reef ledge. This dive is a fast flowing wall; a serious drift dive. We expected to see large tropical reef fish, eagle rays, schooling tuna, hard and soft corals and, if conditions were right, (cooler upwelling water from the depths) MAYBE sunfish.

At 20 metres we reached the drop-off, visibility was a pleasant 25-30 metres, water temperature around 27°C. Descending further along the wall, with the blue abyss of the channel below, we took in the abundant marine life. A myriad of tropical fish all shapes and sizes busily doing their thing, their colours spectacular, as were the stunning healthy coral formations. Tony happily got his camera ready.

Suddenly out of the blue, hovering out from the wall a shadow, a shape. My heartbeat gathered momentum as I finned forward, trying to focus. Could it be? My God - it was - a big sunfish - right there, right in front of me.

Waving frantically at Tony, I caught his attention. Within seconds he was adjusting his strobes, taking off in mid-water to greet the sunfish. Bubbles screamed out as divers intermingled

with this awesome creature. By this time more shapes were emerging ahead. I couldn't believe my eyes as these new fish cruised even closer to us. Aware of us weirdos, they watched us as curiously as we watched them. With two large rotating eyes they appeared unperturbed.

Eight or so bannerfish accompanied one sunfish hugging the huge body closely, looking for all the world like silent escorting sentinels. The contrast was stark - the vivid white, black and gold bands of the bannerfish against the silvery grey body of their charge. Adrenalin was really pumping now as we all tried to absorb the unique scene. Hardly able to contain our excitement it was hard keeping an eye on gauges, at 30 metres time is short for such encounters.

Low and behold, another group of sunfish swam nonchalantly round the corner of the wall. Keeping a respectful distance as they approached they hung almost motionless, seemingly without effort in the blue water. The dorsal and pectoral fins moving just enough to keep them animated. What an amazing sight! They showed no fear, as though we too, were creatures of the sea.

Ascending to 25 metres we discovered other groups of sunfish drifting parallel to the wall. So nonchalant, a few came between us almost within touching distance. Tony twisted and turned shooting every possible angle until his film was exhausted and his strobes became just a dull flicker. It was time to go!

Unbeknownst to each other we'd all started counting when it became obvious we were witnessing a rare phenomenon at our first sunfish sighting. Upon reaching the surface, every diver spat their regs, babbling all at once with the wonder of it all. Consensus of opinion was at least 30 sunfish (apparently the previous record at this spot was 24). A new record! We couldn't wait to tell our tale. We were all completely blown away at such a thrilling dive. Treated like heroes, Tony was especially teased for his previous prophetic announcement

It was a brilliant, magical event! There are so many fantastic underwater adventures to be had but believe me, bumping noses with a sunfish is right up there!



SUNFISH - MOLA MOLA

These huge creatures can weigh up to 2500 kilos, are the world's largest bony fish and can best be described as resembling a big silver dollar. From the side, the body is approximately 2-3 metres from the top of the dorsal fin to the bottom of the pectoral fin. No tail as such, just a stub, quite unique. The eyes are large but appear small in comparison to the magnitude of the body and reflect a bluish, silver grey with numerous lighter blotches of a paler hue around the head becoming more defined towards the rear end.

Looking from the rear, the fish is as narrow in width as it is broad from the side. Usually found at depths between 15-40 metres, sunfish can present an almost ghostlike appearance when hanging out in midwater. On closer inspection, with shafts of sunlight occasionally striking against its body and shark-like skin, the reflection gives the fish the silver dollar image.

Their languid movement in the water is created by the propulsion of both the top dorsal fin and lower pectoral, with the absence of a normal tail. The sunfish diet consists of plankton, and jellyfish are a favourite meal. Like many others, sunfish spawn around 3000 eggs or so each year although next to nothing is known of their breeding habits.

The area around Nusa Lembongan and Nusa Dua, Bali are one of the few places in the world sunfish are seen regularly at certain times of the year.

Diving with Sunfish

Best time to catch the sunfish - June through August.

Bali Hai Diving Adventures provide a variety of diving adventures and can also organize overnight diving on Lembongan Island.

Contact ph: + 62 361 724 062

Email: diverse@indosat.net.id

Website: www.scubali.com



ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Dot & Tony Medcraft successfully ran Exmouth Dive Centre, Ningaloo and were instrumental in developing the whaleshark Code of Conduct and protection, still in use today. They have recently built, and now run, Tulamben Wreck Divers - www.tulambenwreckdivers.com