

INDONESIA - July, 2014

[\(Click here to see the pictures from this trip.\)](#)

No good story is without some drama and this one will have that in addition to beautiful reefs, lovely dives, and fun times. But first . . .

I'm actually starting to write this at 39,008 feet as we head from Singapore to Tokyo on Singapore Airlines A380 (fabulous airline and a great plane) and, after a brief layover, onward across the Pacific and back to Los Angeles. This is the final leg our of Indonesia 2014 trip and we had a little bit of everything.

Our group was ten strong this year consisting of people who have been on this journey with me before and some newbies to the diving in Indonesia. They were: Laura Priess, Vick Thomas & Elisabeth Sykes, Marilyn Lawrence, Sharon DePriester, Mark Geraghty, Tamar Toister & Linda Whitehead, Shirley Parry, and me (Ken Kurtis).

Our diving was done in the Manado area of Northern Sulawesi Island. As you may know, Indonesia as a country stretches almost as far east-west as the United States but is an archipelago made up of some 18,000 islands (9,000 named - 922 inhabited). Sulawesi is one of the larger ones and Manado is the main city on the northern part of the island.

Our diving was done with our good friends at Murex Dive Resort, now owned by Danny & Angelique Charlton. The transfer of ownership took place earlier this year from Angelique's parents and, quite tragically, shortly after that, Angelique's father Dr. Han Batuna died as a result of an accidental fall in his garden. So while we're always happy to return to Murex (this is about our eighth trip there), this one had a different feel for a whole lot of reasons.

But some of those reasons are the changes, some obvious, some subtle, that Danny & Angelique have already implemented. Among the more subtle ones is that breakfast is now served daily from the gazebo near the beach so you're starting your day a few feet from the shoreline while gazing out over the Celebes Sea towards Bunaken and Manado Tua, two of the offshore islands that comprise Bunaken Marine Park and would be among our prime dive sites.

But perhaps the biggest and most welcome change is that they've totally rebuilt their boats. One of the things I've always enjoyed about the diving is that we go in traditional Indonesian-style boats that were adapted for diving. This means they're generally long and sleek and built low to the water. But they also sometimes lacked the things we Americans take for granted on dives trips like storage areas and an on-board head. Not anymore.

The new boats (we dove *Arlena*) are still in the Indonesian style but are much better adapted for diving. They're about 40 feet long and 12 feet wide with nice padded seating in the front, a great tank/gear area in the middle, a real head (with a door and everything) in the rear along with an area in the back for the crew. The boats are really well laid-out for diving and they've also redesigned their ladders so that getting out (entry is done via backroll) is quite easy.

The other thing that I appreciate that they've done for me since 2001 is the creation of My Ramp. Each morning they back the boats in close to shore but they can't come all the way up to shore so you wade out into knee-deep water to board. But since I generally go out in my shoes & socks (and change into dive gear when we arrive - strange as it may sound, I'm not a fan of sitting around in dive gear, let alone wet dive gear - all day), they always build a ramp for me out of a long board that stretches from the beach out to the back of the boat so I can board (along with everyone else) without getting my feet wet.

And at the risk of this making me sound like a total Prima Dona, this comes with my Indonesian nickname that they gave me on our first trip there which is "Opa Gila". While "Opa" is a term of respect for older men, when paired up with "Gila" it actually translates as "Crazy Old Man" and I do whatever I can to live up to the moniker.

The typical dive day at Murex has breakfast officially starting at 7AM but we were usually down there at 6AM for tea and coffee. They now have one of the staff stationed to be morning chef cooking up pancakes, eggs, waffles, and whatever else you need that they can whip up.

While this is going on, their dive staff is arriving and prepping the boat for the dives. When you arrive you are given a large laundry basket and all your dive gear goes in there. Each day, the dive staff loads your basket on to the boat and hooks up your BC and reg. When you board, you confirm your gear is all there and you're good to go. During the day, you live in and out of your basket. At the end of the day, the dive staff takes your basket off the boat, washes your gear, and hangs it up in your dive locker (which is then locked) and the next day the process repeats itself. It's a nice way to dive.

We were doing three dives a day, which is now their normal routine. When I first started diving with them 13 years ago, two a day was the norm and I had to pster them to get the third in. Because the new boats are faster, it's now very easy to get in three dives and still be back at Murex at a reasonable hour, usually no later than 4PM.

So we'd leave at 8:30 each day and head over to Bunaken. Generally we'd do dive #1 shortly around 9:15 (dives are usually one hour bottom time), break for an hour, do dive #2, break for another 60 to 90 minutes and during this time have lunch on the boat, and then do dive #3.

Lest you think "lunch on the boat" translates into "Indonesian box lunch" the reality is far from that. Lunch is prepared at Murex in the morning and then sealed into some innovative (to us anyhow) carrying tins that keep it fresh and warm. There was always rice and then a three main dishes, usually some combination of chicken, pork, fish, or vegetables. And it was always quite tasty and plentiful. It's hard to lose weight on this trip.

The Sulawesi area has two types of dives. You can either do reef dives which are over at Bunaken Marine Park or you can do muck dives. The most famous of these are found in the Lembah Straits (more on that in a bit) but over the last few years, the divers of Murex and other resorts have been exploring the areas around Manado Bay and have discovered very good muck sites there as well.

If you're not familiar with the term, a "muck" dive simply means something generally close to shore that has a predominantly sandy bottom. Within this bottom, especially at Lembah, live some of the most amazing creatures in the world including shrimp, octopi, fish that have adapted themselves to look like leaves, seahorses, pipefish, frogfish, and a host of others. (You'll see a lot of them in the SmugMug slideshow that's the companion to this written report.)

The analogy someone once made was that it's like diving Redondo's Veteran's Park, only with a LOT more creatures. But, like Vets, it's important for you to have excellent control over your buoyancy and trim because one misdirected or strong kick stirs up a heap of sand and ruins it for anyone else until the sand settles back down.

So what we would do many days is two reef dives at Bunaken, motor back across while we had lunch, then do our third dive as a muck dive nearshore, and then made a short run back to Murex. That would usually get us back around 4PM at the latest, which was ample time to relax before the 7PM dinner, or even get in a Murex house reef shore dive.

Although I wanted to do it each day (numerous reasons why that didn't happen), only Shirley & I did that and we only did it one day. Not only was it a pleasant dive but Murex has gone the extra step and laid out an underwater trail to follow. It's still a work-in-progress but they've secured literally hundreds of small white floats on an 18-inch string to loose rocks and planted them every ten feet or so. You simply follow the path of the floats and you're not only on your way, but can easily find your way home. It was really quite effective although any time any sort of a storm moves through that generates swell, the trail will have to be reset because the rocks and floats will all get tossed around. But a really good idea and a nice touch.

In general terms, the diving went from fair/good to excellent to very good. The first couple of days the visibility was really bad, as low as 20 feet or so due to some rain before our arrival. But after about the third day, it picked up to over 100 feet, and while it dropped a little towards the end, still stayed in the 60-80 foot range most of the time.

Before we get to the dives, perhaps we should cover the drama, because there was plenty of it. I've been doing this long enough to know better than to assume that everything will go exactly as planned or that there won't be some unanticipated events, but this trip made me work a little more than usual.

The first piece of drama was mine. Before I left L.A., I checked my dive computer (as you all should be doing) and it worked fine and indicator said the battery was full. LIAR!!!! The next time I pushed the button, as we were getting ready to leave for our first dive, it was dead as a doornail. Fortunately, I had an extra battery with me. Unfortunately, I didn't think to pack the jeweler's screwdriver that was necessary to unscrew the it'sy-bitsy screws on the back of my Proplus2. And I hadn't brought my backup computer this trip. Fortunately, I borrowed a pressure gauge from our dive guide Basrah, borrowed Marilyn's backup Matrix, and was good to go.

When we got back to the resort I was able to find a small enough screwdriver to get three of the four screws out. But the fourth one was stripped. However, I managed to pry the back door off, ripping the screw out in the process, but reasoning that because the screws were outside the sealing area, that I still could replace the battery, secure the three screws, and life would be good.

It was. For a day. The following morning, the computer was once again dead. Now in all honesty, it's hard to tell if it flooded or if I had a bad battery that exploded. But the battery compartment was a mess. However, a little cleaning out and the insertion of another battery and the computer sprang back to life. THIS time, I added duct tape around the battery door and that seemed to help . . . for about three more days until it died again the morning of the final day.

Rest assured, I was using the Matrix throughout as my main computer with the intent of allowing the Proplus2 to "catch up" to the Matrix. But what was interesting was that the Proplus2 with no dives on it, was giving me a more conservative (less bottom time) profile than the Matrix was after a full day of diving. It underscores the need to have your backup computer relying on the same algorithm as your main computer. If that's not the case, then use the more conservative computer as your main and the more liberal as your backup so that if your main fails, you don't go to a backup that's already in deco or violation mode.

We had other computer issues.

Shirley was diving with an older US Divers Scan 4. Between dives, it goes into "Fly" mode which it should automatically go out of when you hit the water. On dive 1 of day 2, it didn't do that for Shirley but stayed in "Fly" mode underwater. (Usually, hitting the button on the surface should take it out of that mode.) Shirley didn't know to simply surface and hit the button, so instead did the entire dive in "Fly" mode. But that meant the computer did not register her dive at all which meant whatever nitrogen information the computer had was not accurate. In cases like these, the rule is to sit out for 24 hours until you and the computer fully outgas and then you can resume diving. And that's what Shirley did.

Mark had an issue with his computer but fortunately it was his backup, which is a Suunto Vyper. These computers are not only fairly conservative but also very sensitive to anything the computer perceives as a rapid ascent. Although Mark didn't do any fast ascents, just pulling the gauge up for a quick peek can seem to the computer like a rapid ascent. Mark didn't notice that the backup computer has giving him a "SLOW ASCENT" warning and surfaced normally after his extended safety stop. But the computer wasn't happy and went into error mode, where it stayed for 48 hours.

The moral of these stories: Know your computers and what they tell you (and more importantly, LOOK at them throughout the dive) and bring the manual with you in case there are any issues. Another diver at the resort couldn't get his computer to go from 32% oxygen (nitrox mode) back to air (21%) and didn't have the manual with him. Fortunately, we were able to find it on-line and switched the O2 percentage.

We also had some issues with what I'll term Sukarno's Revenge (the Indonesian version of Montezuma's Revenge). It hit me like a ton of bricks after our second day of diving so I didn't sleep well and lost fluid overnight. I didn't feel terrible in the morning but I certainly wasn't 100%. I just didn't feel . . . right. Plus I felt like I was a little unfocused.

So, adhering to my own motto of "You never get hurt on a dive you don't make," I chose to sit out the day and just recuperate. Plus, I also advise people to reverse engineer your dives and if something were to go wrong, where would people point fingers? And in my case, it would have been "He lost a lot of fluid, didn't sleep well, was a bit tired and rundown, wasn't really fully focusing but decided to go diving anyhow and that's what tragedy struck." That's not how I want my story to end so I'm quite comfortable with the idea of sitting out until I'm 100% again (which I was by the end of the day).

And whatever I got apparently hit Mark and Vick as well, at different times, and to differing degrees. But one thing to remember if you're traveling and hit with something like this is that while it will pass and in and of itself is annoying and inconvenient more than anything else, you likely ARE losing a lot of fluid. And dehydration can not only be problematic, but can also present some symptoms that can be interpreted as the bends (DCS). So if you suffer through a bout of travelers diarrhea, drink a lot of water and get your fluid volume back up so dehydration is not an issue.

We think this played a role in a concern Mark had. He, too, chose to sit out a day because following his bout, he felt a little out of it. But he was also feeling some possible arm and leg discomfort (he said "pain" was too strong a term). And he spent his day off reading up about the bends. Plus he had the ascent warning violation we mentioned previously on his back-up computer. So Mark had a very legitimate concern that he might be having a DCS issue.

However, his discomfort didn't fit the model as it came and went, and didn't really change intensity. But we always want to take these things seriously, especially when you remember that the joke is that the first symptom of the bends is denial, as in "I can't possibly be bent." On the other hand, a little knowledge and awareness can be a dangerous thing and suddenly you can start thinking that every little ache and pain, especially prevalent as we get older, is DCS.

But help is available, even when you're far away from home, in the form of a consultation with DAN, which is what we did (along with a couple of other hyperbaric sources that I have). And the consensus there, plus what we thought in the field, was that this was not DCS due to the way the symptoms were presenting, and was more likely a residual effect from dehydration. In fact, shortly after accepting that conclusion, we had Mark take two Advil and within half an hour the discomfort he'd mentioned left him and it never returned.

In fairness, Mark's awareness was probably heightened because a few days earlier, we DID have a legitimate case of DCS in the form of skin bends. This is probably one of the lesser-known forms of the bends but I'm beginning to think (because I've seen it a number of times now) that it's more prevalent than we know.

In this case, it was Laura who at the end of day 2, felt somewhat weak and whose stomach and sides had become extremely tender to the touch. Skin bends usually presents itself as pain/weakness/tenderness in the stomach area with an accompanying rash or mottled skin that's usually on the stomach and along the arms or legs as well. Laura didn't have the rash but she had the rest. She had done pretty much the same profiles the rest of us had done, which came close to computer limits and were certainly beyond table limits. As we talked, she also revealed she might have been a bit dehydrated and also might have had some buoyancy issues, especially at safety stops where she may have popped to the surface, on a couple of her dives.

We decided to put her on oxygen and get more advice. We called the DAN Emergency Hotline (919/684-9111). I can't say enough good things about this. Plus they'll accept a collect call from anywhere in the world 24 hours a day. And while we were calling at 5PM Indonesian time, it was actually 5AM North Carolina time (which is where DAN is located).

We got DAN medic Marty McAfferty on the phone who was terrific. And it certainly helps that I've known Marty for a few years. I relayed to him Laura's symptoms and the timeline of the onset and Marty said that he thought, even with the absence of the rash or skin mottling, that there was a good chance this was skin bends. The good news is that this frequently resolves with oxygen treatment, sometimes in as little as an hour, and does not necessarily require full-blown chamber treatment. Marty directed us to keep Laura on the oxygen and monitor her for a couple of hours and to keep him apprised.

Laura started feeling better very quickly on oxygen. Her stamina started to return, the stomach tenderness/pain lessened significantly, and other symptoms such as nausea went away. We kept her on oxygen for about three hours as a precaution, at which point she said she felt about 90% better but really wanted to go to sleep. By the next morning, she was pretty much fully recovered.

However, with a case like this as with all DCS cases, you're done diving for a while to let your body fully recover. The last thing you want is to return to diving too quickly and cause another hit. In a case of chamber-treated bends, the time off from diving can be as long as twelve weeks. In Laura's case, because it was mild, the recommendation is a couple of weeks but with the suggestion that she get a diving medical to clear her for the return to the water. (You can get more info on skin bends here: http://www.alertdiver.com/Skin_Bends.)

The final bit of drama was environmental as overnight before our last dive day, it POURED rain. Your typical tropical torrential rainfall. And when I got up in the morning and walked outside (the rain had stopped by then), my first thought was, "Is that the sound of crashing waves I hear?" When I got to the breakfast area, it was like I was looking at a California beach. There were 2- and 3-footers rolling in one right after the other. And they were breaking right up against the shoreline, occasionally flooding our lovely little breakfast area.

Worse was that there was no way the dive boats could be brought in to the beach. So I was thinking we might lose the last day of diving. But Basrah told me there was a marina a short drive away and they would take all the gear and us there. No problem. And although it was a bouncy ride over, and a couple of sites had limited visibility due to runoff from the rain, we got in three nice dives.

But enough of the drama. Perhaps we should actually talk about the diving.

In a word, despite the visibility issues mentioned previously, it's really good. There's a theory about the origin of life on earth that suggests it started in this area of the Coral Sea because when you do species counts, as you get closer and closer to this part of the world, the number of different species goes way up. In Sulawesi, it's estimated there are thousands of different species of fish, hundreds of species of coral, and unknown species of invertebrates. I can't say we saw them all, but we saw a bunch of them.

And because the diving is done either on reefs or muck, which are two really different types of dives, I'll break it all down that way.

But before I do, I need to throw in words of praise for our dive guides. Because when you're doing this kind of diving, while you can find some things on your own, to find the REALLY esoteric animals, you need a really good guide. And we had two of the best in the form of Basrah Tan, Murex's lead guide, and his faithful sidekick Hanny. I like to joke that my big Nikon D200 is nothing more than a point-and-shoot camera because Basrah points, and I shoot. But when you want to find things like Pygmy Seahorses, Leaf Scorpionfish, almost-invisible crabs, or Mimic Octopus, you won't find them without a good guide.

THE REEFS OF BUNAKEN

If you can picture your ideal version of a pristine reef, with vertical walls full of colorful corals, thousands of fish flitting about, good visibility, some current to move you along (no sense in working on vacation), and with a ton of variety, you've just described the reefs of Bunaken Marine Park.

The wall starts at about 20-30 feet deep and goes into to the blue abyss further than I can see and certainly further than I'm going to venture. I know on one day I was cruising at around 80 feet and could easily see some huge fans that I estimate were another 100 feet below me. So there's a lot of reef but it also means you need to constantly monitor depth so as not to drift too far down.

One of the things I continually marvel at are the sheer numbers of fish that hang along the edges of this wall, within 20-30 feet of it. There are enormous congregations ("schools" makes them sound too small) of Pyramid Butterflyfish and tens of thousands of Red-Toothed Triggerfish (and their teeth really are red). Add in anemones with Clownfish, Spadefish, Puffers, Sweetlips, Angelfish of every hue, all sort of Wrasses, Fire/Two-Tone/Elegant Dartfish, corals and sea fans, and turtles, and you've got quite a visual feast in front of you.

I think we saw more turtles on this trip that I can recall seeing in the past. 90% of them were Green Turtles with the others being Hawksbill. It got to that point that there

would be a turtle and the reaction became, "That's nice but what else have you got?"

However, we did encounter our special turtle friend, Rambo. We've visited Rambo before. He's estimated to be over 100 years old and is simply huge, about six feet from nose to tail. And there's no questions he "owns" the part of Lekuan 1 where he can usually be found. He's very comfortable around divers and we spent over half an hour with him one day.

But even better was Son of Rambo. (I'm taking artistic license calling them "he" but really have no idea if they're males or females.) A short way down the reef from Rambo, we ran into another turtle who was almost as big as Rambo. I know it wasn't Rambo because I could look back and see where Rambo was. So there are actually TWO huge turtles in that part of the reef.

THE REEFS OF BANGKA

We also made a day trip about 20 miles north to the island of Bangka (where Murex also has a resort). The attraction of this area is that it's more swept by the currents and has some of the prettiest and healthiest soft coral reefs I've seen throughout the Pacific. In fact, the dive site of Sahaong has got to have hands-down the most prolific, gorgeous, and healthiest soft corals around.

Sahaong is a pinnacle so you continually circle around it and you're always looking at these gorgeous pastel-colored corals in hues of yellow, orange, red, and pink. The reef is also home to an enormous school - 10,000 or more - of Blue-lined Snapper which are actually yellow. It simply makes for a gorgeous site (as you'll see in the SmugMug slide show).

It's definitely worth a day trip there from Murex or you can stay at the resort and do it in combination with a stay at Murex in Manado.

THE MUCK OF MANADO BAY

Although I don't think I'd want a steady or exclusive diet of muck diving, I do like it once a day. And the muck sites around Manado Bay, and relatively close to Murex, are pretty good.

They're also a lot cleaner than they have been in the past. If you read our 2012 report, you know we talked about how much trash there was in the water, especially at the nearshore sites. There's been a concentrated effort throughout Manado to clean that up and it really shows. In fact, the first day we dove City Extra, not far from Murex, those of us who'd been there before commented on the absence of trash. Plus there's an abundance of life.

Now I will say one thing which I'd hoped we'd see that we didn't see many of were Ghost Pipefish and Ornate Ghost Pipefish. It seemed like two years ago, they were all over the place, as were seahorses and frogfish. Not so this time. There was still plenty of stuff to see, just not those guys.

There's also a site called Tanjung Papaya where they've created a small artificial reef. They made it out of old motorcycles and scooters. It seems they took ones that had been confiscated by the police and never retrieved and sunk them. They're all standing up, side-by-side, tied together, in the shape of a U. The fish have started hanging out around them and there's some coral growth so it has promise for the future.

But each Manado muck site offers something a bit different. We saw Pipefish, Seahorses, Upside-down Jellies, Mantis Shrimp, Frogfish (including a HUGE one the size of my hand), little shrimps, Cuttlefish & Burrfish, Leaf Scorpionfish, and a bunch of different nudibranchs. While the viz may be nothing to rave about (20 foot or so - typical for any muck dive) the variety of creatures is quite special.

THE LEMBEH STRAITS

But any time you talk muck diving, you're going to think of the Lembah Straits. This is small stretch of water, 6-8 miles long depending on how you measure, that sits between mainland Sulawesi and the island of Lembah. For reasons unknown (certainly to me), this small stretch of water is home to probably the highest concentration of weird and wonderful creatures that you'll find anywhere in the world. There are a number of dive resorts here and many people come here to sift through the muck in hopes of finding many creatures to check off of their "wanna-see" list.

Murex is also affiliated with Lembah Resort here and a lot of people I know schedule a week at Lembah. It's definitely a critter-oriented dive. In other words, you're not going to be raving about pretty reefs or good vis (10-25 feet is the norm). Plus the water is a couple of degrees cooler (80-82) than out on the reefs (84-86). If you find what you're looking for, it'll be a great dive. If you don't find what you're looking for, enjoy the sand.

So for me personally, I wouldn't want to spend a week of this sort of diving. But for one day, it's wonderful and we really found some good stuff on this trip. That being said, I wasn't as impressed with the dives sites as I have been in the past. It seemed to me that in the past, we dove sites that also had a bit of structure to them whereas this time we dove sites that were really sandy plain.

Even so, there was a ton of stuff. Here's a partial list of what we saw: Black Ribbon Eel (2), unknown nudi, Ghost Pipefish, numerous cleaner shrimp, Porcelain Crab, Devil Scorpionfish, albino juvy Cuttlefish, Wunderpus, juvy Barramundi Cod, more nudis, Bubble Coral Shrimp, Mantis Shrimp, Warty Frogfish, nudibranch egg sac (rose), Robust Ghost Pipefish, small Cuttlefish, Bangaii Cardinalfish, Tasseled Scorpionfish, and a Cockatoo Waspfish. Oh yeah . . . this was only the FIRST of our three dives. Pretty cool.

The highlight of the day, and certain something that was on my wanna-see list, came on the second dive after we'd seen a Mantis Shrimp with a clutch of eggs and a Long-Armed Octopus. The guide excitedly called us over to proudly show us his great find: a Mimic Octopus.

At first I thought it was another Wunderpus (which are also pretty cool and rare). But then I caught on. What distinguishes the two is that the Mimic has a white edge around all of his arms which the Wunderpus lacks. The Mimic also has two large-ish stalks protruding from his eyes.

The Mimic gets its name from being able to transform (mimic) itself into looking like many other animals: a coral, a fish, a rock, etc. You already probably know that octopi are very good at blending in with their surroundings but the Mimic takes this to a whole new level.

So overall, it was a really nice trip. Despite all the drama and the side issues (and they're all good learning experiences), we had a really nice time. We got in eight days of diving and a total 25 dives overall with a good blend of reef and muck. And the nice thing about diving this area is that it's impossible to see everything in one trip so it's a place that worth coming back to again and again. And our friends at Murex will certainly take good care of you so that's not only where we'll be returning to, but where we'll direct you as well if you do this on your own.

The other nice thing about this trip is that, because we have to fly back through Singapore and we have to overnight to make the early-morning flight out regardless, we always book a few days in Singapore with what Singapore Airlines terms the Singapore Stopover Holiday. This gets you airport transfers, hotel, a bus that goes around town, and freebie tickets to numerous sites and attractions around Singapore.

We LOVED the hotel we chose, the Hotel Royal @ Queens. It was nice, modern, and friendly and it was extremely well-located, close to the bus stop and an MRT (subway) station. It's also close to Raffles Hotel and a number of Singapore's hi-tech malls.

When we got to Singapore Wednesday evening, most people went to the Singapore Night Zoo, a separate zoo from the world-famous daytime zoo. The next day we went to Sentosa Island to hit the S.E.A (South East Asia) Aquarium, the world's largest and came away very impressed, especially with their enormous Open Ocean tank. We had lunch at DinTai Fung and then spent the evening doing a revolution around on the Singapore Flyer, a Ferris wheel (essentially) that takes you up in a sealed compartment with 20 people (but you can walk around) and reaches a height of 550 feet to give you a really great view of the city. We did it a sunset so we got the city lights coming on. The entire trip was about 30 minutes. And Friday saw us hit the Botanical Gardens, the new Gardens by the Bay, and the symbol of Singapore, the Merlion.

Singapore is truly one of the great cities of the world. It's phenomenally efficient and well-run, and it's always a joy to go there.

So for the two weeks we were gone, we were able to pack in an awful lot of stuff. And the stopover in Singapore is a nice way to break up the long journey back home. Unfortunately, it's gotten a bit longer because as I'm finishing this up, we've completed our flight to Tokyo (6 hours), have had a 2-hour layover here, and am now sitting on the A380 awaiting take-off. It seems there are thunderstorms north of Tokyo and all flights are being delayed. At the time we were to leave, the captain came on told us we were #38 in line and it was going to be a while. An hour later, he said we'd moved up to #7. But they've got the entertainment system on, they've served some food and drinks, and everyone's making the best of it. (And after two hours, we were rolling down the runway and finally on the last leg of our journey home.)

Seems like the drama never stops. But that's half the fun of it. If it all just went according to plan, we wouldn't have these wonderful stories to tell.



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