

World-class soft coral gardens are a common sighting in Bangka. Image by Markus Roth.

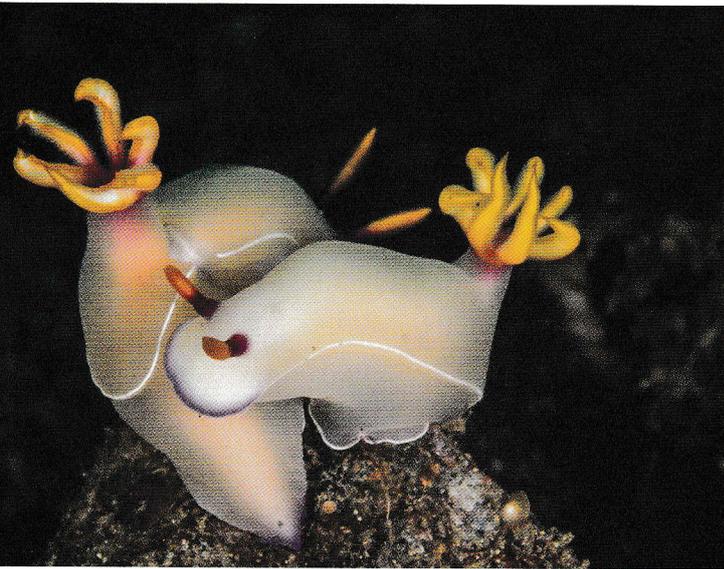


NORTH SULAWESI'S BIG 4

By Sarah Wormald

Maximise your Indonesian dive trip and learn why heading to North Sulawesi may be the best way to maximise your experience.





Above: Tiny treasures, such as nudibranchs and ghost pipefishes, are abundant in this area of the world. Images by Edwin van der Sander.

Opposite page: Many dive resorts in North Sulawesi offer unlimited house reef diving – the ideal way to maximise your in-water time.



With over 17 000 individual islands, Indonesia is the largest archipelago on the planet. For divers, Indonesia is a Mecca; it is *the* place to dive, but with so many islands and so many options, how do you decide where to dive?

One thing is for sure; if you want to explore all of the possibilities in Indonesia, it is going to take you some time. A good way to maximise your Indonesian dive trip is to think smart and look at visiting multiple regions in one trip. This does not necessarily mean incorporating a huge amount of domestic travel into your itinerary. In fact, it is much simpler than most people think, if you have a little bit of inside knowledge and logistical know-how.

North Sulawesi is one of Indonesia's most famous and spectacular diving regions and the ideal place to visit if you are hoping to cash in on as much of Indonesia's diverse marine life and underwater topographies as possible.

There are four special diving areas in this part of Indonesia: Manado Bay, Bunaken Island, Bangka Island and the Lembeh Strait. Manado Bay is a relatively new diving area which boasts several rare species of critters combined with both muck and reef diving. Bunaken Island and its surrounding marine park have long been heralded for featuring spectacular large walls that plummet down vertically to over 900m. Bangka Island is famous for its sloping reefs, which are adorned with stunning soft corals and excellent macro-life combined with passing pelagics. The Lembeh Strait, dubbed "The Critter Capital of the World", is home to all things weird and wonderful which inhabit its volcanic, black sand sites, including numerous endemic species such as the Banggai cardinalfish and the Lembeh seadragon.

Seasoned divers may have visited one or more of these areas over several vacations but it is actually possible to see them all in as little as 7-10 days.

LOGISTICS

➔ If you base yourself with an operator located in Manado (most dive resorts are outside of the city with beachfront locations), it takes just 40 minutes to get to the dive sites around Bunaken by boat. This means that two morning dives at Bunaken are the norm, with an afternoon dive around Manado. Most Manado-based operators dive Bunaken on a daily basis, but if you stay on Bunaken Island they are less keen to run dive trips to Manado.

➔ Bangka Island is just under two hours from Manado by boat and it is possible to dive this route if you are staying with Murex Dive Resorts. You board a boat in the morning for your dive trip and finish up in Bangka – a seamless diving transfer with the opportunity to

dive at remote sites in-between the two locations which otherwise would not be available.

➔ Bangka Island is one hour away from the Lembeh Strait by boat and Murex Dive Resorts operates boat transfers to the renowned Lembeh Resort with dives along the way included presenting a chance to dive lesser-known sites and to absorb the dramatic scenery during the journey.

➔ Travelling directly from Manado to the Lembeh Strait is also possible if you do not want to include Bangka Island. The trip from Manado to Lembeh is around an hour and a half by road.

MANADO BAY DIVING HIGHLIGHTS

Manado is the provincial capital of North Sulawesi and the city sits on the edge of a large bay. Outside of the city is a beautiful countryside which stretches up to picturesque volcanic highlands. There are numerous dive resorts situated outside of the city and each makes an excellent basis from which to dive Manado Bay itself as well as Bunaken Island. Manado Bay is garnering fame for its diversity of sites and marine life. The majority of the diving is classed as muck diving but these are not "plain sand" sites; they are littered with coral outcroppings and reefs.

Dives sites such as Poopoh (also known as Bethlehem) are favourites with macro photographers who are keen to spot seahorses, pipefishes and nudibranchs on the shallow-water seagrass beds, and frogfishes and longfin squid on the deeper sandy slopes. City Extra is a great site for cephalopod seekers; it is possible to spot mimic and blue-ring octopuses, and flamboyant and reef cuttlefishes. The Ambon scorpionfish is also frequently spotted here, along with a plethora of other cephalopod species. Night diving at these sites is a real treat too!

Manado Bay is also home to the *Molas* shipwreck which sank in World War II. Its history is unclear but the diving is far from it. The shipwreck lies on a sand slope which many divers enjoy just as much as the shipwreck itself as it is littered with critters.

Tanjung Pisok is located close to the *Molas* shipwreck and is a hard coral slope with a large density of green tree (*tubastrea*) corals as well as sponges and table corals. This is a great site for

finding interesting bottom dwellers including crocodilefishes (flatheads), flounders, leaf fishes, dragonets and scorpionfishes. Keep an eye out to the blue as eagle rays and tuna are known to pass through.

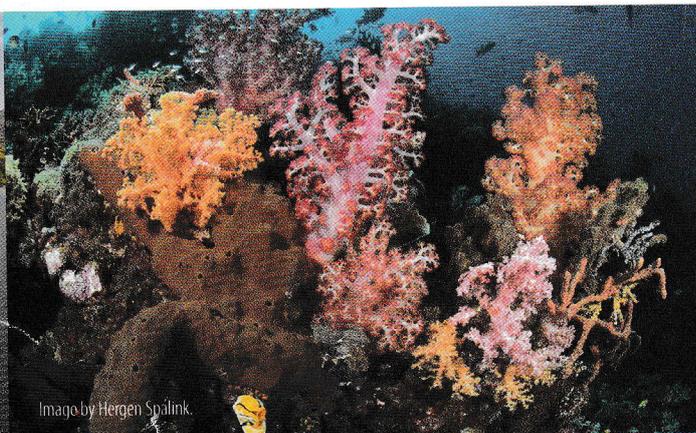
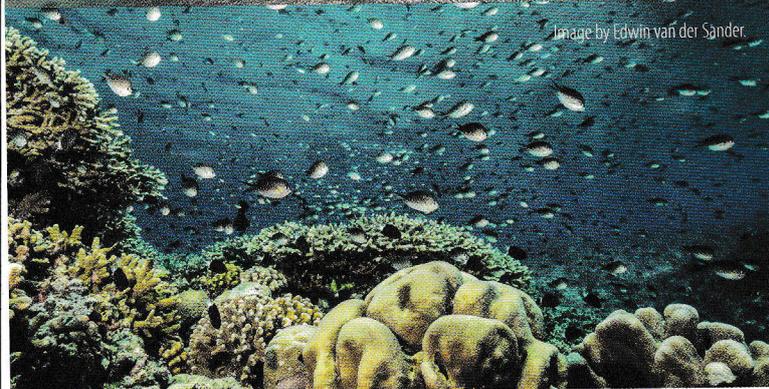
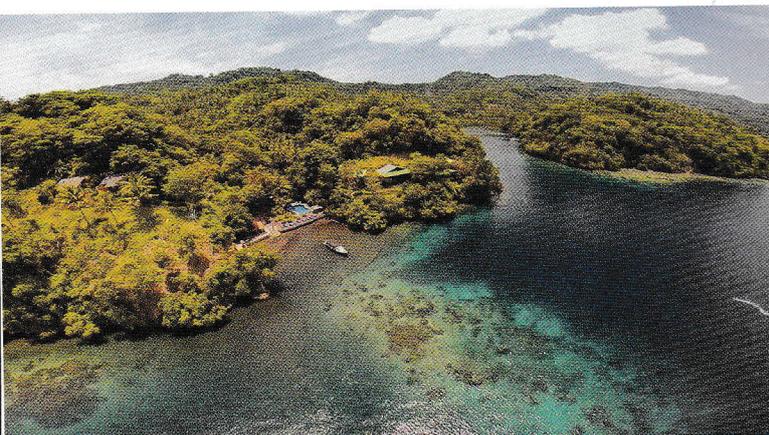
BUNAKEN DIVING HIGHLIGHTS

Bunaken's dive sites are famous for their wall dives but there are other sites that offer sloping reefs and a range of topographies. If you are based in Manado, be sure to be on the lookout for dolphins on the boat rides each day.

Lekuan I and Lekuan II are two sites which epitomise the diving around Bunaken Island. They both offer dramatic vertical walls which feature ledges on which huge green turtles rest lazily, small caves which are often occupied by whitetip reef sharks and beautiful corals bursting with macro life. The topography of these sites is breathtaking and the clouds of redtooth triggerfish and pyramid butterflyfish are awe inspiring.

Ron's Point is another exciting Bunaken site which offers a sloping topography, providing something quite different from Bunaken's classic walls. If you are hoping to see big fish, then Ron's Point should be on your list. Large tuna, jacks, whitetip reef sharks, great barracuda and the occasional passing eagle rays are all seen here.

Sachiko's Point is another wall diving site on the eastern side of Bunaken which is frequented by larger species. It is not unusual to see blacktip and whitetip reef sharks, banded sea snakes and sting rays as well as an array of smaller reef fishes and turtles.



BANGKA ISLAND DIVING HIGHLIGHTS

Bangka's dive sites range from sloping reef drift dives, small walls, rock pinnacles and everything in between. The diving at Bangka is a kaleidoscopic experience with world-class soft corals draped from every hard surface they can inhabit. These soft corals are home to pygmy seahorses, candy crabs, beautiful cowries as well as soft coral shrimps. When you are not diving in Bangka, it is the perfect place to relax and unwind in peace and tranquillity surrounded by nature.

Sahaung is one of Bangka's most colourful dive sites and it offers decent currents to boot. Schooling blue-striped snappers hover over the reef, juvenile whitetip reef sharks hide out underneath table corals, clouds of redtooth triggerfish occupy the blue and passing dogtooth tuna and barracuda are known to cruise by.

If you are looking for critters, then Batu Mandi is an excellent site to visit. There are a series of underwater pinnacles rising up from around 25 m and the hard corals here are the highlight along with giant and warty frogfishes, cuttlefish and more pygmy seahorses.

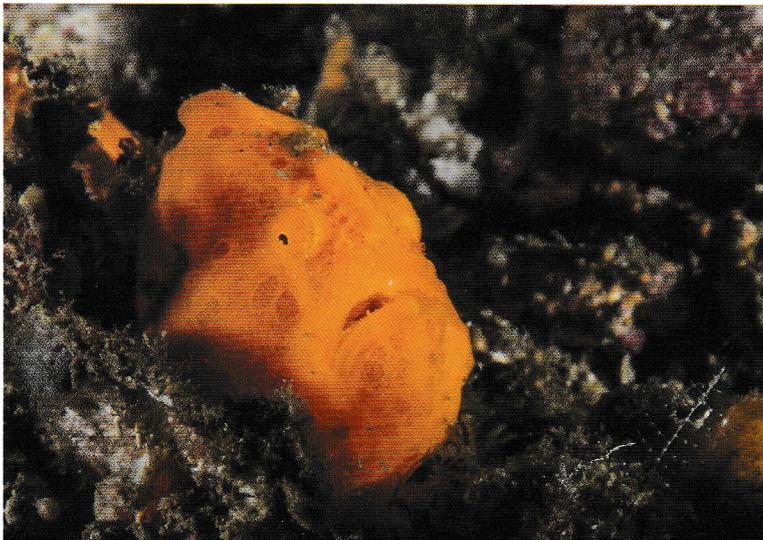
Below: In Lembeh, divers are likely to encounter frogfishes of all shapes and sizes. Images by Edwin van der Sander.

Bottom: The lush coral gardens in Bangka are home to a range of tiny critters, including pygmy seahorses. Images by Edwin van der Sander.

Opposite page

Left: The Rhinopias is one of the many iconic creatures that inhabit the Bangka region. Image by Edwin van der Sander.

Right: For divers looking for a shark fix, Bangka is home to whitetip sharks that can often be found under a ledge or in a small cave. Image by Markus Roth.



LEMBEH STRAIT DIVING HIGHLIGHTS

Lembeh Strait has been referred to as the "Twilight Zone" because of its rare and unusual marine life. The majority of dive sites are black sand slopes which may appear barren at first but after a second glance their secrets are revealed. Iconic Lembeh Strait critters include the hairy frogfish, blue-ring octopus, mimic octopus, wunderpus, flamboyant cuttlefish, Rhinopias, Ambon scorpionfish, harlequin shrimp, bobtail squid, pygmy seahorse (three different species) and the list goes on.

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TK, Hairball and Jahir are three of Lembeh's best-known black sand sites. The trick to diving at these sites is to go slowly and check out every item of debris, rock and even pieces of trash that you see. These items are all potential hotspots for critters. A guide with a good set of eyes for spotting macro life is essential at these sites.

Nudifalls is a combination site that offers something for everyone; a small wall, rubble patches, sand and a deeper garden of soft corals. The anemones towards the foot of the wall are where divers can catch a glimpse of the rare and endangered Banggai cardinalfish. This small fish grows up to 8cm and has the most exquisite markings with a mix of stripes and dots. Nudifalls, as its name suggests, is where you'll see a wide variety of nudibranchs as well as soft coral crabs, pygmy seahorses, ribbon eels, giant frogfishes and the occasional Rhinopias.

THE ANEMONES TOWARDS THE FOOT OF THE WALL ARE WHERE DIVERS CAN CATCH A GLIMPSE OF THE RARE AND ENDANGERED BANGGAI CARDINALFISH.

Another great site for finding Banggai cardinalfish is Bianca, a dive site next to, and sometimes a little bit underneath, a permanently moored ship named *Bianca*. It is also a site for seeing mandarinfish weaving in and out of the staghorn corals in the day time.

If you are looking for rare species, then Lembeh should definitely be included in your itinerary.



DRY TIME

North Sulawesi does not only provide excellent diving opportunities; for divers (or non-diving friends and family) who want to take land tours and soak up some culture during their stay there are a number of fantastic options.

Tangkoko National Park

This is a nature lover's dream. Tangkoko is home to the crested black macaque which is indigenous to North Sulawesi and, if you are lucky, you may also spot the tarsier, one of the world's smallest primate species. Tangkoko National Park protects hundreds of mammal, bird, reptile and amphibian species so there is undoubtedly a lot of wildlife to see.

Minihasa Highland Tour

The Minihasan highlands offer fresh air, stunning scenery, traditional flower markets, volcanic peaks and crater lakes. This is a great way to see rural North Sulawesi, experience the culture and enjoy the friendly North Sulawesi people.

White Water Rafting

If you are looking for some additional excitement, then white water rafting through the jungle should be enough to get your adrenaline pumping.

Spas and Massages

Many dive resorts have spa facilities and a relaxing day of massages, manicures and pedicures is the perfect way to unwind at the end of your diving trip.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

Ask about unlimited house reef diving: Many dive resorts in North Sulawesi offer unlimited house reef diving which is a great way to maximise your in-water time without maxing out your budget.

Airport: Manado Airport is the airport you need to fly into. Direct flights are available from both Jakarta and Bali which are the most common entry points to Indonesia. The official name of the airport is Sam Ratulangi International Airport (Airport code: MDC).

Ask about all four areas: Many operators have resorts in two or more places making transfers easier and, if possible, with dives from the boat *en route*. Some operators work in partnership with others so that they can offer tailored packages.

Water temperature: The water temperature is pleasantly warm all year round with an average of 27°C, although it can be cooler in Lembeh around August.

Take spares: North Sulawesi is a remote area and purchasing replacement gear is not easy. Pack extra camera batteries and memory cards.

Water: Tap water in North Sulawesi is not drinkable.

Electricity: Plug sockets are for two-pin (round) plugs, 230 V, 50 Hz.

VISA: South African passport holders are eligible for a free 30-day visa on arrival. Your passport must still have six months remaining and you may be required to show your outbound ticket on arrival.

Climate: The average temperature in North Sulawesi is between 25-28°C year round. The wet months are between November and March.

