

# Sulawesi: Dreams of a rainbow sea

Award-winning underwater photographer **Alex Tattersall** recommends the species-rich waters of North Sulawesi in Indonesia, after a blissful month obsessing over the weird and wonderful marine fauna

The familiar sense of excitement and anticipation washed over me as our Silk Air flight came in to land at the North Sulawesi airport of Manado. Travel-weary and overdressed for the oppressive humidity, suitcases bulging with underwater photography toys, the expectation of wonderful subaquatic adventures awaited.

This visit to the enchanted island held even more allure than usual, as we were away from December's frosts for an entire month and my son Louie was going to learn to dive! We'd planned almost three weeks in the critter-rich, world class muck-diving hotspot of the Lembeh Straits at the photographer-friendly Lembeh Resort, followed by ten days of coral reef wall diving in the Bunaken National Park at the newly-built luxury boutique resort of Bunaken Oasis. No wonder excitement was high.

North Sulawesi's location, due south of the Philippines, puts it proudly in the middle of the species-rich waters of the Coral Triangle. As such, the region's diving industry is well-developed with offerings of resort accommodation and diving options to suit most budgets. Regular flights to the capital, Manado, from numerous Asian cities, including the hub of Singapore for European travellers, ensure a steady flow of keen divers, each contributing to the development of the infrastructure of the area. Worthy of note also is that Manado airport now has regular flights to Sorong, the gateway to Raja Ampat, making a stop off either before or following a Raja Ampat trip a very attractive proposition.

The climate of North Sulawesi is tropical and humid, with lush green vegetation giving a strong clue to the high level of annual rainfall. The rainy season runs from November to April, bringing impressive lightning storms and dramatic sunsets. The dry season tends to run from May to October with temperatures consistently above 30°C. The topographical nature of the Lembeh Strait offers shelter from winds, making diving possible year round. The Bunaken National Park by contrast is more exposed to the winds of the Celebes Sea and on the very rare occasion during the wet season when winds can pick up, these weather conditions may limit diving opportunities.

Our journey took us from Heathrow through the delightful airport of Singapore and on to the 3.5-hour flight to Manado airport. We moved quickly through customs at Manado – where an entry visa is no longer required – and then hopped into a minivan for the 'slightly hairy' two-hour drive across North Sulawesi to the industrial port city of Bitung. Here we were picked up by boat to make the 20-minute crossing of the world famous Lembeh Strait to Lembeh Island, where we were welcomed into the luxurious Lembeh Resort.

Everything about Lembeh Resort is set up for world class quality muck diving, with a particular focus on underwater photography and marine biology. It has been built around a small black sand beach with accommodation set back into the jungle gardens and on the hilly slopes that encircle



Left: Giant frogfish change their colours to match their sponge home

Top: Peacock mantis shrimp

Above: Cowrie shells inhabit the soft coral heads

Right: Friendly boxfish!





📍**Top:** Batu Angus mangrove site

📍**Above:** Barrel sponges host the hairy squat lobster

📍**Left:** Lacy *Rhinopias* are one of the Holy Grail critters

the small bay. As such, once arriving at the resort, to explore the local area further requires booking onto one of the many guided tours on offer. This should be a consideration for those with non-diving partners who are keen to do more than relax around the pool or in the spa.

### Welcome to the Weird

The Lembah Strait is a world class diving destination known for its concentration of weird and wonderful critters. Its unique underwater topography offers black volcanic sand on the mainland side of the strait and white sand/coral dive sites on the Lembah Island side. Most dive sites are found within a 20-minute boat ride of the resort and each one yields unique encounters with marine life.

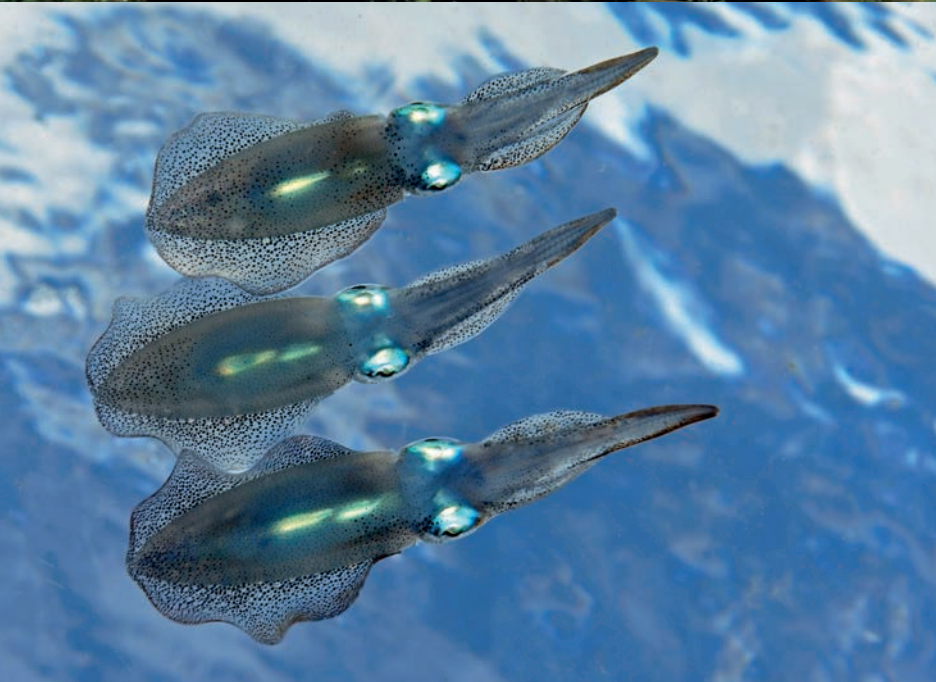
If conditions are unfavourable at one site, or there are too many divers already on that site, the next site is just around the corner and will not fail to impress. The nearby city of Bitung provides a wealth of expert dive guides on the doorstep, which again puts the area in a class of its own. Their ability to see even the most miniscule of critters never fails to amaze and their enthusiasm to offer divers the best of experiences and their own genuine fascination with their local marine environment is hugely infectious.

The 'muck diving' style of Lembah will not appeal to every diver, as visibility can be variable and some sites play host to weird and wonderful species resident in obvious human detritus. It will arguably appeal most to underwater photographers and those divers who enjoy immersing themselves into the fascinating lives of diminutive marine animals. The marine life and its behavioural activity is seasonal, which in itself makes each visit to the area very varied.

My advice is to rely on local knowledge, as the guides will know which sites are 'going off' with







particular species at any given time. Most dives are in the 15-25 metre range, with the occasional drop down to 30 metres if a particular subject is a little deeper (for example some gorgonian fans hosting minute pygmy seahorses). Nitrox is therefore recommended to extend bottom time and allow for the inevitable repetitive diving as sitting out dives becomes increasingly difficult. The house reef at Lembeh resort should also be explored, especially as a night dive; the density of wonderful critters won't fail to astound.

If you tire of the muck diving and would like to see pristine reef, Lembeh Resort work with two other resorts around North Sulawesi. Murex on Bangka Island offers spectacular soft corals and schooling reef fish, even the occasional dugong, and its sister resort, Murex Manado, gives access

📍**Top:** *Chromodoris bullocki* at Lembeh's Nudi Falls

📍**Above left:** Squid gather around mooring lines

📍**Above right:** Louie and instructor Dimpy Jacobs

to the Bunaken National Park, characterised by wall dives teeming with wildlife punctuated by numerous green and hawksbill turtle encounters. It is possible to book a combined trip of these three resorts under the name of 'the Passport to paradise'.

During our stay at Lembeh Resort, resident marine biologist, Dimpy Jacobs donned her instructor hat and expertly guided my son Louie through his dive training. Before we knew it he was qualified, diving with us and looking with wonder at the many creatures of the Lembeh Strait; highlights for him being the mimic octopus, the hairy frogfish and the numerous anemones with their resident anemonefish, commensal shrimp, and porcelain crabs. Watching your child fall in love with the sea and its creatures is an absolute joy to behold.





### A dream realised

After much too short a time, we bade farewell to Lembeh Resort and headed across North Sulawesi to a private port in Manado, where we were met by the transfer boat for Bunaken Oasis Resort and Spa. The next part of our adventure had begun.

Wow, just... wow. We spent the next ten days dragging our jaws around. Bunaken Oasis Resort and Spa is the brainchild of Brits Elaine and Simon Wallace. We had met them eight years previously when Elaine was doing an underwater photo course with Martin Edge. She fell in love with underwater photography there and then, and began travelling and diving around Indonesia. We met her two years later at Manado airport and she told us that she and Simon had decided to open a boutique, eco-friendly resort. There is so much to say about what a wonderful job they have done, but to summarise – you really need to see it to believe it.

The philosophy of the resort is to offer a luxurious experience to the visitor while having a positive impact on the local community. The desalination water setup, for example, offers free water to the local village. Elaine and Simon clearly take more pride in the way the local community has embraced the resort and the contribution they are making to Bunaken Island than they do for their own balance sheet. Their care and concern for local employees and their working conditions is matched only by the attention to detail accorded to the experience of their guests.

The resort is currently made up of 12 chalets built into the tropical rainforest foliage with minimal impact. Each chalet has a sunset view over the volcanoes of the North Sulawesi mainland. They have been built and fully furnished in the resort workshop using local carpenters and ethically sourced sustainable wood. The resort's centrepiece is an infinity pool with cascading waterfalls, shallow play areas for little ones and a deep drop off for diver training. The sun sets directly in front of the pool beyond the volcanoes of the mainland, making sunset cocktails luxuriating in the warm water or comfortable pool bar a sumptuous experience. 🌊



📍Above left: Fangblenny in residence

📍Above: *Phyllodesmium* sp nudibranch

📍Left: A pink skunk anemonefish

📍Below: Porcelain crabs inhabit anemones





Left: Bunaken Island's healthy coral diversity is outstanding

Below left: A bubble cowrie, Bunaken

Below centre: Louie meets an enormous turtle

Below right: The reef at Siladin Island



### Bunaken underwater

Diving in Bunaken National Park is best known for drop-off wall dives, as the fringing reefs of the five islands in the park fall down to several hundred metres. The Park is also one of the world hot spots for green and hawksbill turtles; they are accustomed to divers and can be seen in very healthy numbers. The area is prone to currents bringing in pelagic fish and feeding the colourful coral reefs. More than 90 resident fish species have been recorded in the park and are present in strong numbers.

Happily, Bunaken has not been affected by recent overheated seas and the coral bleaching which has caused such damage in other parts of the Indonesian archipelago. If divers are looking for a different diving experience, a 30-minute boat trip to the Manado mainland will satisfy the 'muck-diving' fans, as fascinating critters abound along the mainland coast.

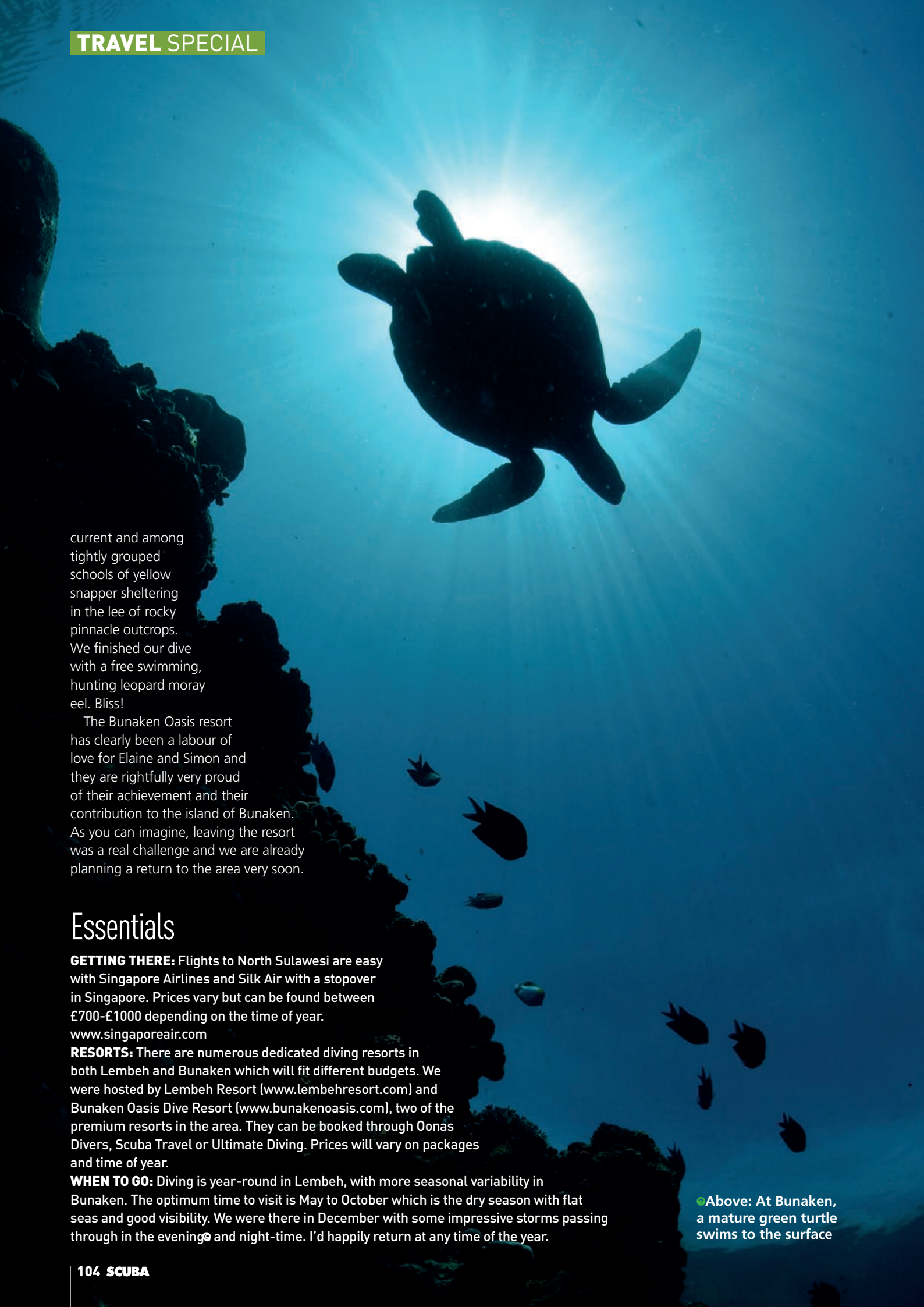
The coastline of the island of Bunaken is protected by well-established mangroves, which act as nurseries to young turtles and juvenile animal life, while providing atmospheric photo opportunities and fascinating snorkelling encounters. Before we left the resort, Louie and I planted several mangrove plants in front of the resort, taking their place among other seedlings planted by previous guests. Bunaken Oasis plan to develop a turtle hatchling sanctuary to protect the many eggs laid on the beaches of the island from being consumed by the local community. We also had the privilege of being involved in the release of a group of hugely cute young green turtles, which had been rescued seven months previously from the dinner tables of the local peoples.

Sitting on the Bunaken Oasis dive boats, we felt very spoilt. The boats have been furnished in wood and have a luxurious feel, elevating them well above the functional dive boats of other dive operations. If you like to be treated, the staff at this resort have been well trained and attention to detail is as apparent on the dive boats as it is back at the resort. Hot towels, fresh fruits and pampering await after each dive. Unlike some resorts though, where you feel the guides might be doing this just as part of their job, we genuinely felt that our guides / captains and boat crew were proud to be part of the Bunaken Oasis experience and, in turn, we felt proud to be guests.

The dive sites were all that had been promised, although westerly winds and nightly thunder storms had impacted the visibility on the west side of the island. Accordingly, we focussed on the easterly sites, and spent some high-quality time in the world famous 'Turtle City'. I will never forget our final dive of the trip at the East point of Bunaken Island at 'Sachiko's point'.

Here we fell into the warm, azure water to be met by pristine corals and a 'healthy' running current. Louie became Superman as we travelled across the colourful fringing reef, past wise looking green turtles feeding on soft corals, through a million triggerfish defying physics and swimming up-





current and among tightly grouped schools of yellow snapper sheltering in the lee of rocky pinnacle outcrops. We finished our dive with a free swimming, hunting leopard moray eel. Bliss!

The Bunaken Oasis resort has clearly been a labour of love for Elaine and Simon and they are rightfully very proud of their achievement and their contribution to the island of Bunaken. As you can imagine, leaving the resort was a real challenge and we are already planning a return to the area very soon.

## Essentials

**GETTING THERE:** Flights to North Sulawesi are easy with Singapore Airlines and Silk Air with a stopover in Singapore. Prices vary but can be found between £700-£1000 depending on the time of year. [www.singaporeair.com](http://www.singaporeair.com)

**RESORTS:** There are numerous dedicated diving resorts in both Lembeh and Bunaken which will fit different budgets. We were hosted by Lembeh Resort ([www.lembehresort.com](http://www.lembehresort.com)) and Bunaken Oasis Dive Resort ([www.bunakenoasis.com](http://www.bunakenoasis.com)), two of the premium resorts in the area. They can be booked through Oonas Divers, Scuba Travel or Ultimate Diving. Prices will vary on packages and time of year.

**WHEN TO GO:** Diving is year-round in Lembeh, with more seasonal variability in Bunaken. The optimum time to visit is May to October which is the dry season with flat seas and good visibility. We were there in December with some impressive storms passing through in the evening and night-time. I'd happily return at any time of the year.

☛ Above: At Bunaken, a mature green turtle swims to the surface