



Diving Indonesia's
Bunaken

Text by Kelly LaClaire. Photos by Kate Clark



Diver and white-mouthed moray eel; Papuan toby (right inset)

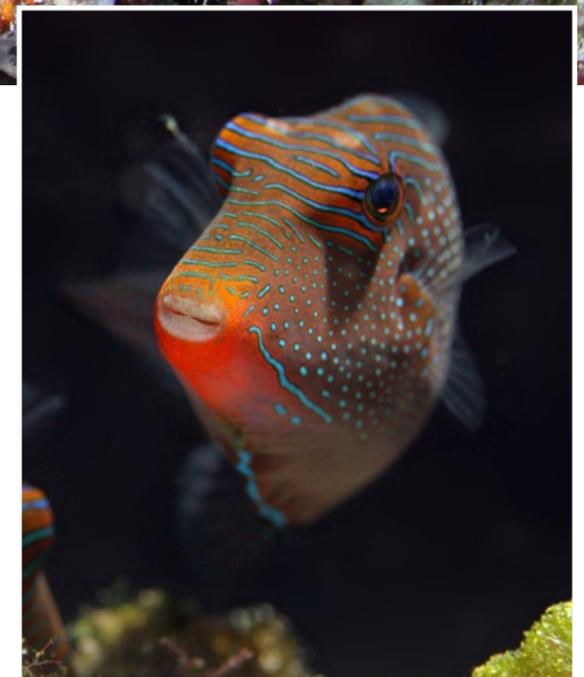
We're swimming fast. Too fast for my liking. I'm taking heavy gulps, and I know my tank won't last very long if we don't slow down soon. Just as I'm about to stop and risk losing my group, we hear a rapid series of bangs coming from our dive boat in the distance. Our guide, a lithe Indonesian with pistons for legs and bottomless iron lungs, points into the blue and somehow quickens his pace.

A few meters ahead to my left, my cousin, Kate Clark, an accomplished diver and tireless swimmer, senses my fatigue and looks back to make sure I haven't quit on her. She slows her speed

a bit, trying to be a good buddy and stick with me. The girl is wearing snorkel fins and carrying a 40 pound camera for Pete's sake, I think to myself. How is she swimming so fast?

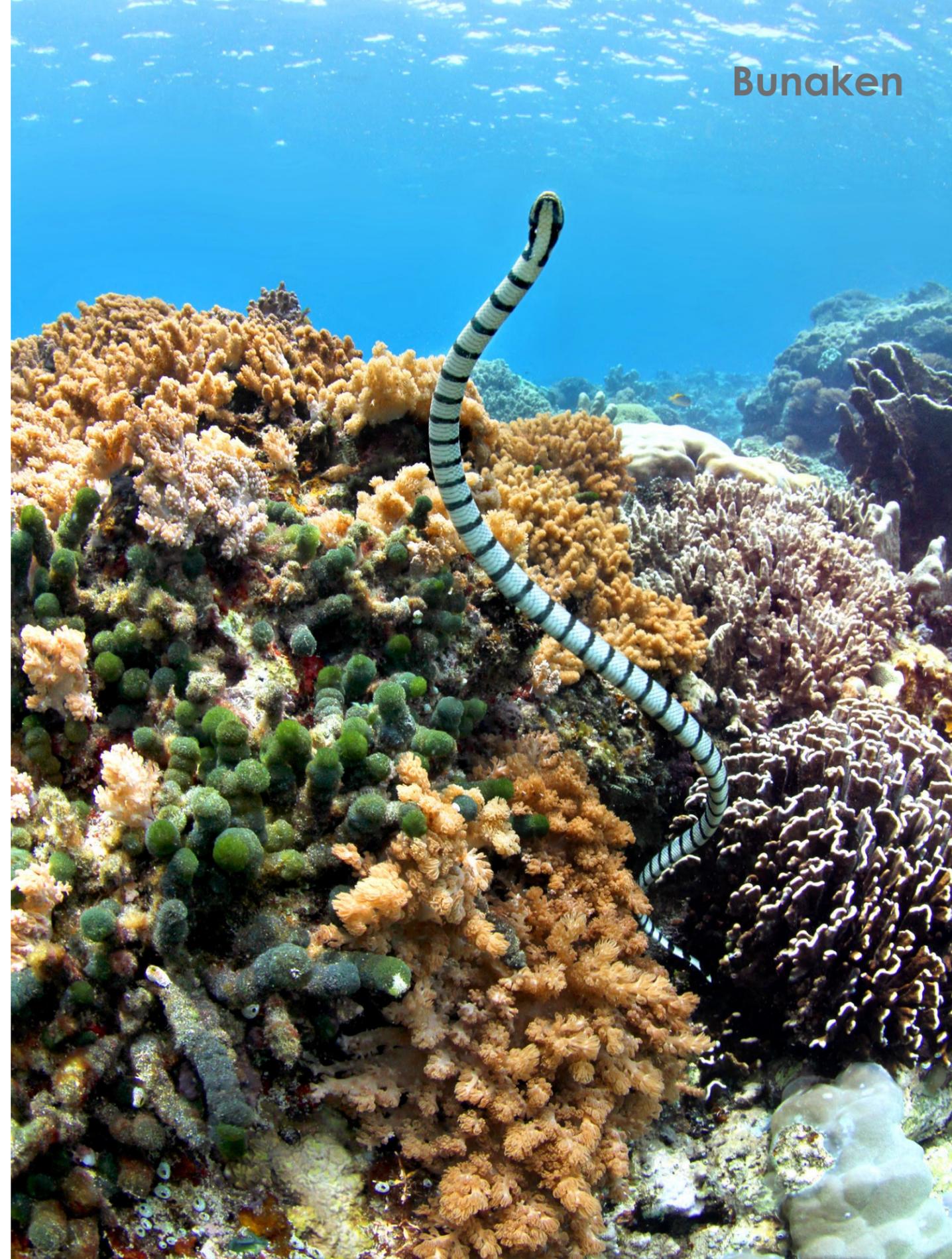
Kate has me check my gauge, and I groan silently as I see I've already used a third of my air. We've only been in the water ten minutes. She smiles patiently and points to her own gauge (which, of course, is still full) and then to her octopus—"You can always take a few sips off mine if you need it," her eyes say.

More banging, frantic now and louder than ever; the crew has found what they were looking for. Kate beckons me to push on, and I begin kicking with renewed vigor, knowing our prize is just ahead. After another few minutes of hard swimming, I check my pressure gauge once more—the tank is half empty. My heart is pounding audibly,



and I can no longer hear the banging from the boat. My legs are throbbing, and I consider surfacing and giving up. I look up to signal Kate and see her pointing frantically ahead towards the sheer drop off of the giant wall to our

Clingfish in yellow feather star. PREVIOUS PAGE: Large red gorgonian sea fan



sands of Bunaken. A tall, slight woman stood at the water's edge and waved us in while two dogs danced at her feet, wagging their tails energetically. Tina Melson, co-owner of Two Fish Dive Resort with Nigel Thomas, served hot tea and cookies while giving us a brief history of the island,

anywhere inside the park's boundaries you can see its lush slopes of coconut palms gathering pillows of clouds throughout the day. The dive sites around the inactive volcano feature some of the steepest, most dramatic walls in the area and are absolutely packed with life.

"The underwater landscapes around Bunaken are breathtaking," Tina told us. "There is so much diversity of marine life here—hard and soft corals, reef fish, invertebrates, pelagics, turtles and so on—that each dive offers something new and exciting for any certification level." She paused a moment before smiling, "You're really going to love it here."

She was right. The first two days, as Tina promised, were spectacular. The giant walls of the park's volcanic islands are absolutely monolithic, dropping hundreds of meters, and home to more turtles than any one area I have ever encountered. In the first several dives, we saw over

as the boat crews and dive masters took our gear to our cabin.

Bunaken National Marine Park covers nearly 900 square kilometers of ocean ecosystem and was established in 1991. The park is dominated by the rising crest of Manado Tau, a cone shaped peak that reaches 600 meters above sea level. From almost

right.

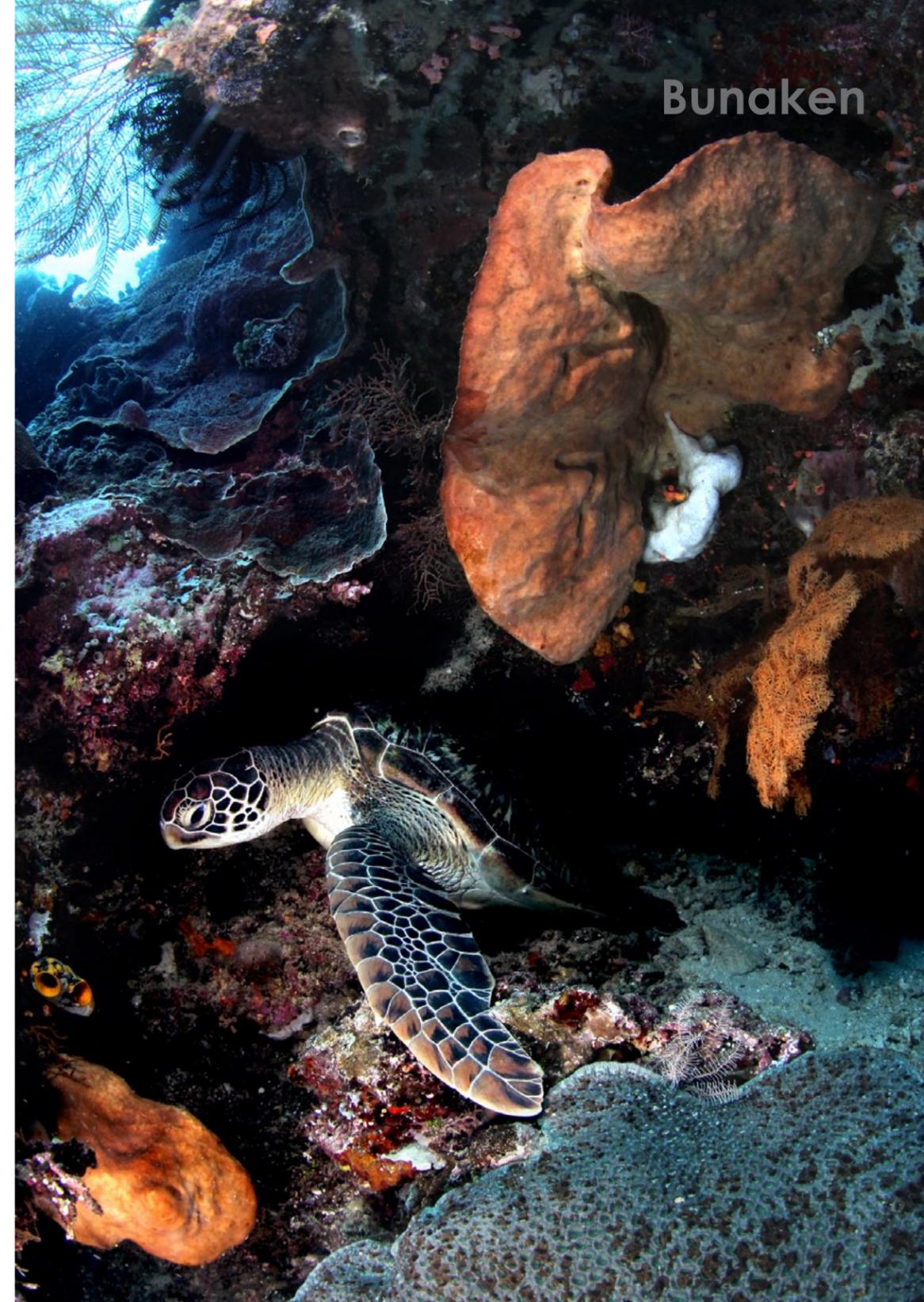
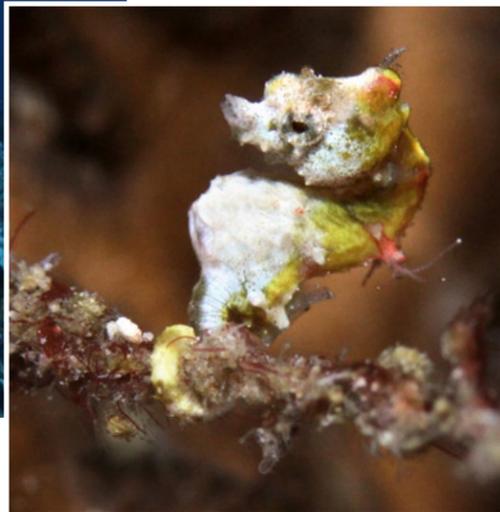
Look! Look!
I shift my gaze and see them.
Everything changes.

Volcanic cliffs

Two days earlier, our little boat drifted into a small inlet surrounded by the lush mangroves and the white

Banded sea snake; Bubble coral shrimp (top left); Detail of eye of blue-spotted stingray (left)





ing interest in Kate's camera and spent several moments following her around, inspecting the domed housing with its mouth agape and its eyes wide with wonder. In some areas,

they were so ubiquitous that soon (and I cringe at having to admit this) I was actually beginning to pass them by without a second glance.

Banded sea snakes and leery morays are also extremely common in the nooks and crannies of the rocky outcroppings—the small caverns and deep cracks in the granite making excellent hunting grounds. Large numbers of blue spotted stingrays make the sandy coral breaks along the sheer cliffs their home as well, but they are rather shy and divers need to keep their cameras at the ready if they want a chance at capturing a good image.

Each underwater precipice here is literally swarming with pyramid butterflyfish and feisty red toothed triggers that you can

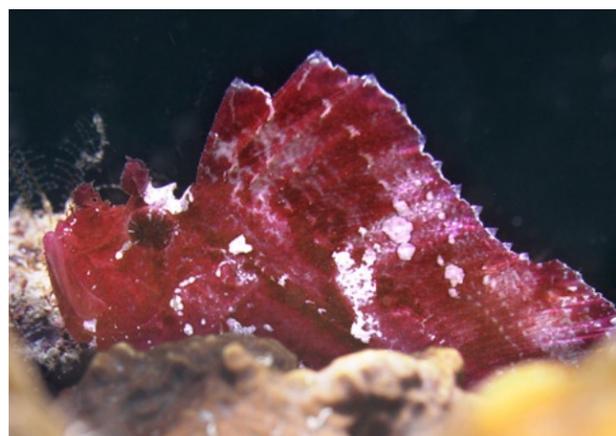
actually hear chomping their teeth, as they charge your mask and regulator valve. The triggers aren't the only species fierce about protecting their territory, however. Anemone fish can be downright belligerent, rushing your mask and slapping your ears with their tails if you spend too long peering into their habitat.

Large schools of silver jacks also whirl and dance along the sheer drop-offs and white tip sharks can usually be found cruising the walls as well. Unfortunately, a long, hot Indonesian spring had pushed the water temperatures to nearly 82°F, and the sharks had sought cooler waters in the depths below. Bunaken also boasts the occasional whale shark sighting.

Unexpected macro

To be sure, most dives in Bunaken are wall dives, and the volcanic crags are absolutely covered with large corals and colorful fish, but that's not all the protected group of islands has to offer.

On our third day, Kate asked our guide, John Kanoneng, if there were any good spots for macro. John just smiled and said in his thick accent, "Any dive is good for the small lens. You bring macro, I show you." And he did,



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Hawksbill sea turtle head-on; Clownfish on anemone; Flatworm on reef; Pygmy seahorse; Green sea turtle in alcove; Leaf scorpionfish

a dozen hawksbill sea turtles and several massive "greens" that were easily six feet long and as big as Smart Cars.

One friendly and curious green sea turtle took more than a pass-



CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT: Whip coral shrimp; Ornate ghost pipefish pair; Randall's shrimp goby; Sponge coral crab; School of jacks



in a big way.

As the other divers in our group swiftly drifted along the rock faces in search of more giant sea turtles and rays, we slowly and methodically stopped every few feet, as John searched out ornate ghost pipefish, banded boxers, leaf fish, orangutan and porcelain crabs, pygmy cuttlefish, juvenile puffers, grumpy and stoic scorpionfish

and wire corals hiding the tiniest shrimps imaginable; and all this on a single "average" wall dive.

Bunaken sometimes gets short shrift when it come to its microscopic life—being so close to Lembeh Strait where macro photography is considered by some, the best on earth, doesn't help—but, as John proved again and again, the hawk-eyed guides here will seek out pygmy seahorses, candy crabs, juvenile sweet lips, leaf scorpionfish and a host of other exotic, tiny creatures that make the sheer cliffs their home. It's enough to convince anyone that Bunaken's macro life is world-class.

My personal favorite find was a blood-red, electric clam hiding under a rocky overhang. The

rest of our group had passed by the area rather swiftly, not finding anything special besides a large purple sea fan. But John led us into a small cave and methodically searched the rocks and dark cracks until he spotted the jumping arcs of electricity zipping across the glowing edges of the creature's shell.

Hundreds of species of nudibranchs thrive along these walls as well. "Nudi hunting", as it commonly referred to, can actually get quite addicting, and each time we spotted a new and bizarre color combination hidden among the corals, we flashed happy hand signals and big smiles.

So, if you happen to hear another diver telling you Bunaken is all wall dives and the macro

life is lacking, please, please, please don't listen. There is abundant and varied macro life hiding along those volcanic cliffs, and if you slow down just a little and allow the guides to help you, Two Fish will make a believer out of you.

Topside treasures

Monkeys at Manado. A stone's throw from Manado Harbor sits the Tangkoko National Forest, a small rainforest reserve that includes three mountains: Mount Tangkoko (1,109 meters), Mount Dua Saudara (1,109 meters) and Mount Batuangus (450 meters). It is here, hiding among the dense flora of the island's volcanic peaks, that one can often view the endangered Tarsier Monkey—the world's



Decorator spider crab





Children of the local village

Bunaken



The majestic Protestant church in Bunaken's village is dwarfed by the volcano, Manado Tau, in the background. Rising 600m above sea level, its lush slopes of coconut palms gathers pillows of clouds



Flowers in Bunaken's village

smallest (and possibly most adorable) primate. Only the size of a tennis ball, these little primates are a nocturnal wonder, foraging for geckos and small insects among the hardwood trees, their enormous, saucer-shaped eyes and soft velvety fur gleaming in the moonlight.

Tarsiers are the only monkeys in the world that are completely carnivorous, eating nothing but small animals and insects. They accomplish this with incredibly acute hearing and unmatched eyesight, as well as strong legs and elongated feet and fingers that allow them to pounce on and hold prey while hunting.

You also may be lucky enough to encounter a small group of Celebes crested macaques—small, jet-black monkeys with long muzzles, high cheek bones and a long tuft of hair on the top

of their heads. These primates, known as Yaki to the locals, are endangered as well, but conservation efforts are helping.

One group in particular, known as Save the Yakis has made great strides in educating villagers and adding environmental protections. Unfortunately, Celebes can be devastating to local crops and farmers view them as pests. The interaction has thinned the population significantly, and deforestation has robbed this species of much of its natural habitat.

Village life. Life on a remote island is pretty quiet, so if you're looking for a place to get wild after a day of diving, Bunaken probably isn't the place. But the slow and easy atmosphere is exactly what I liked most about our stay.

Kate and I took a leisurely walk

around the island and visited the main village. Here, you can find friendly locals sipping cold drinks, napping on shaded porches or tending to their land. Children chase small pigs and goats or gather in groups to play tag or kick a soccer ball around the narrow streets.

In the center of the community lies Bunaken village's splendid and majestic Protestant church—its gothic spires and peaked eaves towering above the palms. It was Easter the day we visited, and the pews were filled with well dressed villagers singing hymnals, chanting psalms and fanning themselves in an attempt to keep cool.

The island, like much of Indonesia, is a mixture of Christians and Moslems who, unlike many parts of the world, seem to get along just fine. This was somewhat of a shock to me at first. Living in

YOU FOUND A WHAT?

In case you haven't heard of the famous coelacanth, let me give you a brief introduction.

This prehistoric fish is truly a living fossil. Its body and behavioral habits have hardly changed in the last 400 million years. The coelacanth, known to the locals as raja laut (king of the sea) is one of the most mysterious and enigmatic fish in the ocean and was believed to have gone extinct 80 million years ago.

However, in 1938 a live coelacanth was found off the coast of South Africa. Not surprisingly the scientific community was astounded and suspected that the Comoros Islands were the only area left that was home to these ancient fish. Turns out they were wrong again.

In 1997, a couple honeymooning in Manado (eight miles from Bunaken Island) saw a coelacanth for sale in a local fish market and reported the finding to researchers. Several months later, in 1998, another coelacanth was caught in the Bunaken Marine Park by two local fisherman, and two more were filmed underwater in 1999 by researchers in the same area.

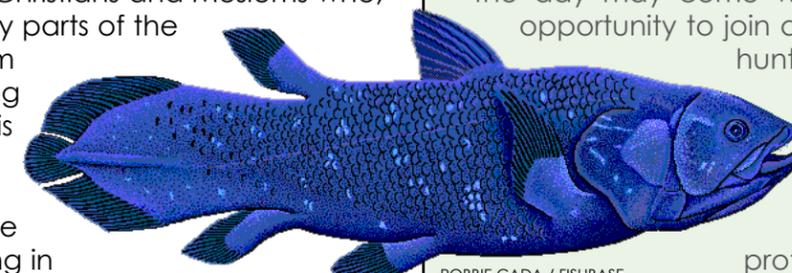
Scientists concluded after examining the second catch, the fish was not one of the South African coelacanths, but a separate species of its own. Since then, four more coelacanths have been caught in the waters around Bunaken, and the Indonesian government seems to be cooperating with research and conservation efforts to study and safeguard the ancient fish.

Currently, very little is known about the coelacanth, other than the fact that they usually hide in deep caves during the day and feed along the coasts at night. But that may be changing.

In October of 2000, a team of experienced trimix tech divers located a small school of the coelacanths at a depth of just over 100 meters off the coast of South Africa.

Now, Two Fish has started their own technical dive operations in the marine reserve. So, the day may come when you have the opportunity to join a special group and hunt for the elusive coelacanth and other

bizarre creatures in the deep and unexplored waters of Bunaken's protected sanctuary. ■

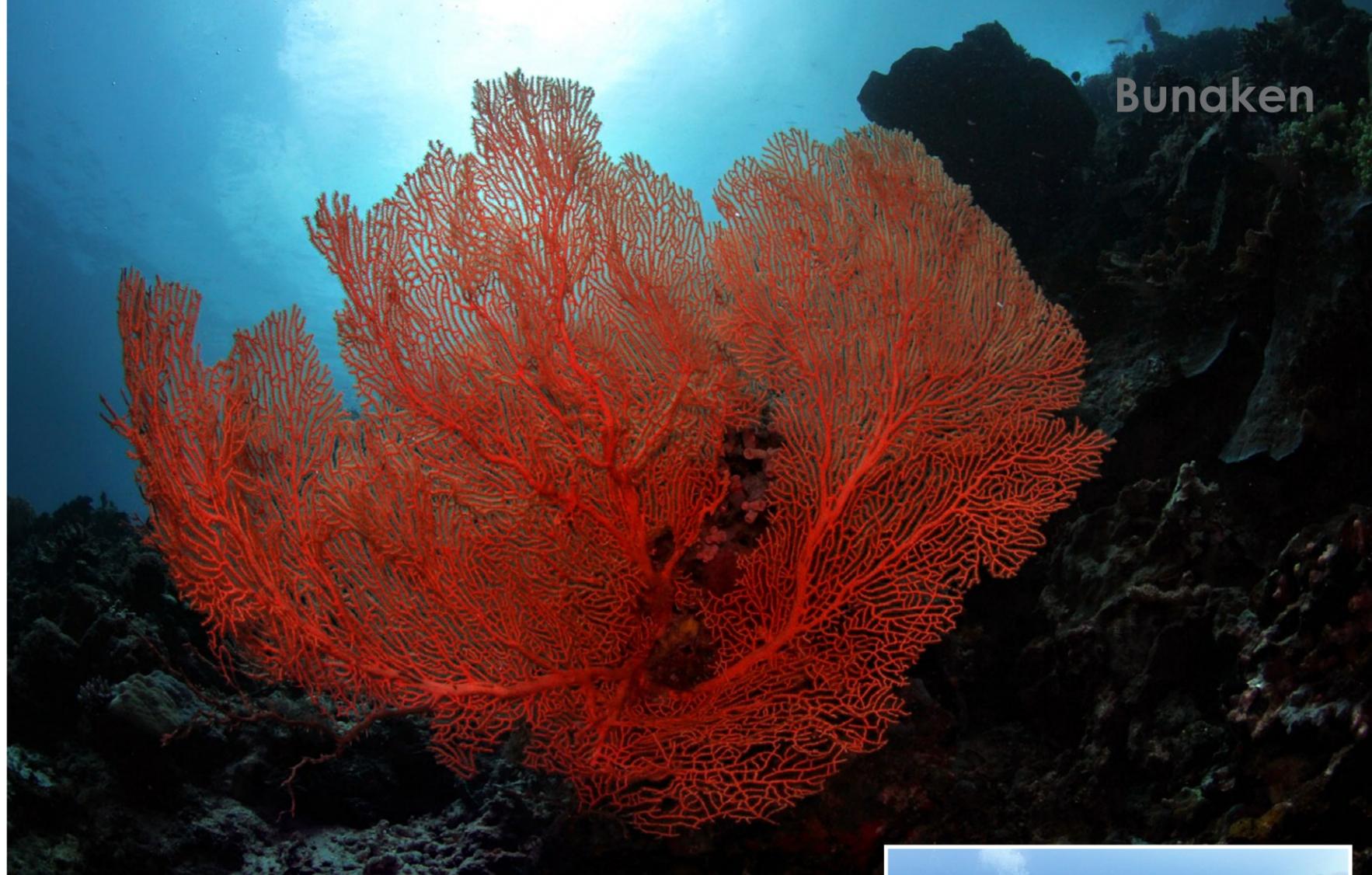


Coelacanth

ROBBIE CADA / FISHBASE



Wall with billowing red soft coral, author Kelly LaClaire hovers in the background, Mantahege Island



Large red gorgonian sea fan and large colony of staghorn coral (right), Mantahege Island

America, I am used to the constant, bitter hostility between these two groups. If more people could come here and see these two sects living alongside one another peacefully, with almost no animosity or resentment, it might just change some thinking back home and around the world.

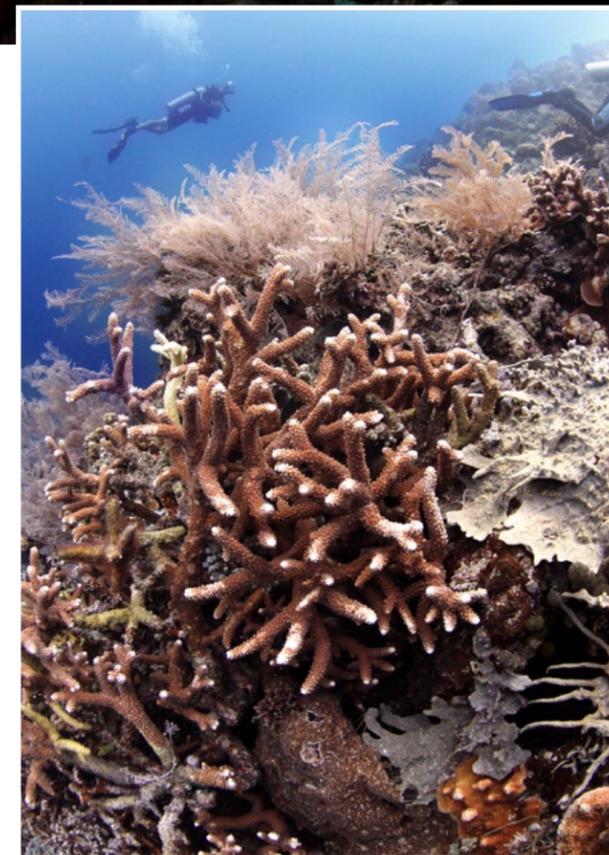
But perhaps my favorite top side activity was lounging around the Two Fish common area, visiting with friendly folks after a sun filled day of diving. Each night, after enjoying homemade satays, fresh fish selections and spicy noodle dishes, several guests would gather around the softly lit cabana for a cold bottle (or three) of Bintang while the dive masters sat nearby playing guitar and singing under the stars.

We made many friends there, sit-

ting under a brilliant moon sharing the day's dive adventures, swapping travel stories, telling one another about the lives we led back home. One couple hailed from New Zealand, another from Spain, and many others from far reaching locals across the planet.

When I sit down to write articles about my experiences, I always smile widest when I look back on these moments. There are few things better than learning about the world from good conversation with fine people.

It was on one such evening that one of the guests asked us if we had visited Barracuda Point. Kate and I looked at each other with wide eyes and simultaneously leaned forward in our chairs, our interest seriously piqued. "What's that?" we asked.





Barracuda Point

The next day we were up early and headed out towards Mantehage Island, several miles north of the resort. Mantehage is just one of many islands in the marine park that, due to their distance from Bunaken, are far less visited than the main islands. Each trip is an all day, three tank affair and a bit more expensive, but the remote waters and relative lack of divers make the surcharge well worth it.

After about an hour, our captain shut off the engine and gave one of the greatest dive briefings I've ever heard.

"This is Barracuda Point," he said. "We only have one shot at this. Everyone is going to get in the water, and the boat will go ahead of us and try and find the school. When they do, we will hear rapid banging, and then we're all going to swim like hell! If we do this right, you are all going to see a huge swarm of giant

barracuda. Sound good?"

Everyone on the boat nodded feverishly.

"Okay, then. Let's go!"

Ten minutes of hard swimming later, I was in agony. My lungs were on fire and my calves were cramping with every kick. I had just decided to give it up and surface when we finally saw the massive school. At least three hundred giant barracuda were swimming in a lazy tornado near the steep drop off.

All the pain disappeared instantly. My lungs no longer burned, my legs didn't seem to be tired at all. My attention, which had previously been focused entirely on my protesting body, had shifted wholly to the sight before me.

I took two deep pulls on my regulator and then my breathing levelled out. I'd never seen anything like this before.

Our guide put out his arms, telling us to stop. He didn't want to spook them. The

Barracuda ball at the surface; Diver Markko doing a technical dive (top left); Diver over coral garden (left)



Bunaken

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Mangroves at Two Fish; The dive guides of Two Fish on deck; *Chromodoris annae* and *Halgerda batangas* nudibranchs; Sunset silhouette of village church; Yellow feather star on barrel sponge

On the surface, a loud chorus of whoops rang out. The whole group was pumped and no one restrained their emotions. Each one of us had just experienced one of

those rare dive encounters we knew may never come again, and we were far too excited for inhibitions.

Kate looked at me, eyes bright and filled with laughter. "You know..." she said, "I really love scuba diving."

Yeah. Me too, Kate. Me too. ■

Assistant editor Kelly LaClaire and underwater photographer Kate Clark are cousins based in Portland, Oregon, USA. They share a passion for worldwide travel, experiencing new cultures, and friendly competitions to see who can last the longest on a single tank of air—so far, Kate is the undisputed champion.

SOURCES: SULAWESI.COM, WIKIPEDIA.ORG

breaking away from one another to sweep the rock face again in wide, deliberate circles. It was one of the most beautiful sights I've ever seen

underwater, and I didn't want the dive to end.

The show lasted 20 minutes before the barracuda decided to head down to deeper waters. Our little group followed them a few meters into the blue, watching as they slipped down into the depths below.

diver, and I have been in similar situations, but still, these were barracuda, and damn big ones. The average fish was around two meters, some even larger, and I knew what these aggressive hunting machines could do if they decided to strike. Most of them eyed us suspiciously as they passed; a few baring their teeth just to let us know that this was their territory, but none broke away from the pack to investigate us further.

A few moments later, Kate pointed to our left and another school, this one bigger than the first, moved in and began circling the area. The two groups moved like slow, underwater cyclones along the rocky walls, coming together for a brief moment in a great double helix and then

school moved out a bit into open water but slowly drifted back towards the coral, getting within touching distance of Kate and I.

I'm not embarrassed to tell you my heart rate quickened considerably. I wasn't too worried; I'm an experienced



fact file



Bunaken, Indonesia



SOURCES: U.S. CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, NORTH-SULAWESI.ORG, D. SILCOCK

History Moslem merchants from Persia began visiting Indonesia in the 13th century and established trade links between this country and India and Persia. Along with trade, they propagated Islam among the Indonesian people, particularly along the coastal areas of Java. In 1511, the Portuguese arrived in search of spices after their conquest of the Islamic Empire of Malacca. They were followed by the Spaniards. Both began to propagate Christianity and were most successful in Minahasa/North Sulawesi and Maluku, also known as the Moluccas. However, it wasn't until the arrival of the Dutch in the early 17th century that Christianity became the predominant religion of North Sulawesi. From 1942 to 1945, Japan occupied Indonesia. Shortly before Japan's surrender in WWII, Indonesia declared its independence. However, it took four years of often brutal fighting, sporadic negotiations, and mediation by the United Nations before the Netherlands finally agreed in 1949 to transfer sovereignty. Strife continued in Indonesia's unstable parliamentary democracy until President Soekarno declared martial law in 1957. Soekarno was removed from power following a fruitless coup in 1965 by alleged Communist sympathizers. President Suharto ruled

Indonesia from 1966 until 1988. Suharto was toppled in 1998 following a round of riots, and in 1999, free and fair legislative elections took place. Indonesia is the world's third most populous democracy, Government: Republic. Capital: Jakarta.

Geography

Located in Southeastern Asia, Indonesia is an archipelago situated between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Coastline: 54,716km. Terrain consists primarily of coastal lowlands, with interior mountains on larger islands.

Climate Tropical, hot and humid, with more moderate climate in the highlands. The water temperature is normally 28-29°C (84-86°F) year round, with an occasional "chilly" 27°C (82°F) spot. Most divers use 1mm neoprene suits. However, some people prefer 3mm.

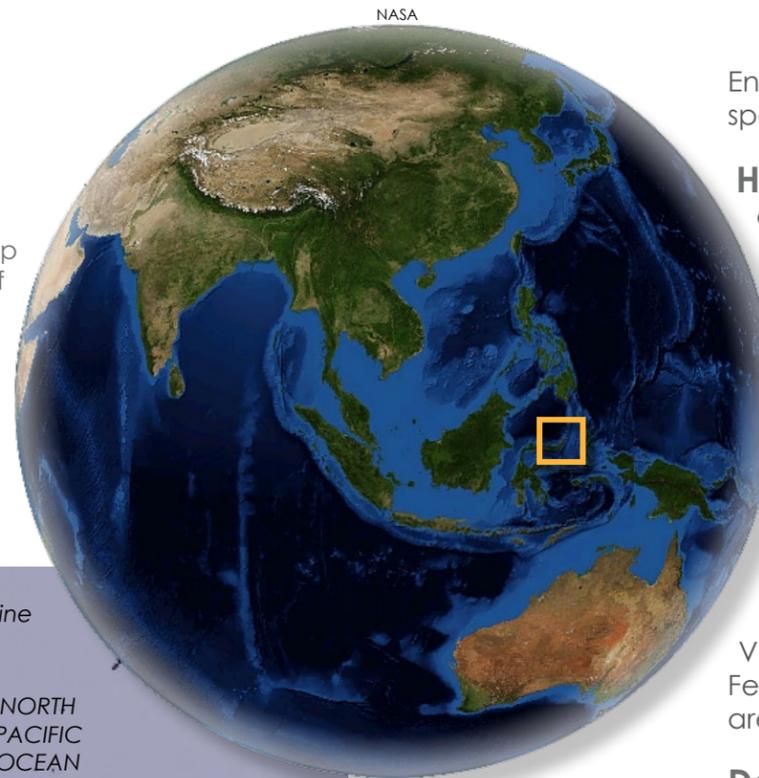
Environmental issues

Challenges include industrial waste water pollution, sewage,

urban air pollution, deforestation, smoke and haze due to forest fires. Logging—the rainforests within the combined West Papua/Papua New Guinea land mass are second in size only to those of the Amazon, making it 'the lungs of Asia'. In 2001, there were 57 forest concession-holders in operation around the country and untold other forest ventures operating illegally. Mining—tailings from copper, nickel, and gold mining are real threats.

Economy A vast polyglot nation, Indonesia has experienced modest economic growth in recent years. Economic

RIGHT: Global map with location of Bunaken
BELOW: Location of Bunaken on map of Indonesia
BOTTOM RIGHT: Porcupinefish with cleaner wrasse, Bunaken



machines in tourist areas offer the best exchange rates, Travellers cheques are becoming quite difficult to use except at banks. Exchange rates: 1EUR=12,723IDR; 1USD= 9,737IDR; 1GBP=15,127IDR; 1AUD= 9,972IDR; 1SGD= 7,908IDR

Population

251,160,124 (July 2013 est.) Ethnic groups: Javanese 40.6%, Sundanese 15%, Madurese 3.3%, Minangkabau 2.7%, Betawi 2.4%, Bugis 2.4%, Banten 2%, Banjar 1.7% (2000 census). Religions: Muslim 86.1%, Protestant 5.7%, Roman Catholic 3%, Hindu 1.8% (2000 census). Note: Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world. Visitors are encouraged to respect local traditions and dress modestly. Internet users: 20 million (2009)

Language Bahasa Indonesian is the official language, plus English, Dutch and local dialects are spoken. In tourist areas,

English, Spanish and German are spoken.

Health There is a high degree of risk for food or waterborne diseases such as bacterial diarrhea, hepatitis A and E, and typhoid fever, as well as vectorborne diseases such as chikungunya, dengue fever and malaria. Check with WHO or your dive operator for prophylaxis recommendations. Larium is not effective. Bring insect repellents containing DEET. International Certificate of Vaccination required for Yellow Fever if arriving from infected area within five days.

Decompression chamber

Manado: Malalayang Hospital tel: +62 0811 430913
Makassar: Rumah Sakit Umum Wahidin Sudirohusodo tel: +62 0411 (584677) or 584675

Travel/Visa/Security

Passport valid for six months beyond intended stay is required. There is a Visa-On-Arrival for 35 countries including USA, UK, most European and Asian countries. It is US\$25 for a stay of up to 30 days. Although there is an active independence movement in Papua, tourists have not been impacted.

Web sites

Indonesia Travel
www.indonesia.travel/en

