

## **Dive trip report to Manado (Bunaken)/Lembah Strait/Bangka Island in North Sulawesi, Indonesia.**

My wife and I made a 13-day dive trip to Indonesia in July 2004. This trip rates overall as the best all-round dive trip we have made to date. There have been other trips that were better for certain things but this trip was good from beginning to end.

**Trip Arrangements** – were all done through Bunnie Usman of **Sito's Tours and Travel** (also know as Indonesiapromo.com) and can be found at: <http://www.indonesiapromo.com/>

Here is our trip as booked. We made some changes to the trip “on the fly” after we arrived at MUREX that I will discuss later.

- R/T air ticket LAX to Manado on Singapore Airlines.
- R/T airport transfers in Manado
- 4 nights at Murex Dive Resort with 2 days boat diving and 1 house reef shore dive (total 5 dives)
- 5 nights live-aboard diving, unlimited diving, full board.
- 2 nights at the MUREX Bangka Island Resort with 2 days boat diving and 1 house reef shore dive (total 5 dives)
- Full board accommodations based on twin share
- 1 night layover in Singapore at the Elizabeth Singapore Hotel (cost was US \$78 but included in package price)
- Total cost - US \$2,368 per person (as booked)

At the last minute we decided to stay on the M/V Serenade for an additional day and spend our last night at MUREX Dive Resort in Manado vice spending 2 nights at the Bangka Island Resort. MUREX was able to come through and accommodate all of our requests. By swapping the 1st day of Bangka Island shore-based diving for an additional day of shore-based diving from MUREX Dive Resort and the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Bangka Island shore-based diving for an additional day of liveaboard diving we ended up with 3 days of boat diving (total of 6 boat dives paid for in the package price) from MUREX Dive Resort and an extra full day of diving on the M/V Serenade for an additional

US \$30 per person. To this we added 5 additional boat dives (3 for me and 2 for my wife) to our 3 days of shore-based diving from MUREX Dive Resort at a cost of US \$100. **Total cost per person after making all our changes and additions - US \$2,423 per person.**

All of our shore-based diving and liveboard diving for the entire trip was done with MUREX Dive Resort in Manado. It is a family-run business and we really enjoyed our stay at their resort and on their liveboard M/V Serenade. We were made to feel like family throughout our stay and the staff was very courteous, helpful and professional. The following are links to their website:

<http://www.murexdive.com/>

[http://www.murexdive.com/MUREX\\_liveboards\\_maps.html](http://www.murexdive.com/MUREX_liveboards_maps.html)

**Trip Over** - we left our home at 9:30 AM on 12 July and arrived at MUREX Dive Resort at about 3:00 PM on 14 July after a 27.5-hour “door-to-door” journey. That included a 9-hour layover in Singapore. We flew from Los Angeles to Singapore via Singapore Airlines with a 1.5-hour layover in Tokyo Narita Airport. This was our first experience with Singapore Airlines and we were very impressed with them. They have the most comfortable and roomy “economy” class seats that I have ever sat in. The food was much better than what I am used to when I fly “economy” on United. The service provided by the flight crew was also excellent. We arrived in Singapore at about 1:00 AM on 14 July and checked into the Ambassador Airport Transit Hotel for a 6-hour stay. This hotel is within the airport so there is no need to clear immigrations or customs. The cost was about US \$40 (not included in the package price) but it was well worth every penny of it to have a hot shower and a comfortable bed for a nap during the layover. Hotel reservations are highly recommended because we saw some people without reservations getting turned away. From Singapore to Manado we flew on Silk Air.

**MUREX Dive Resort** – has been there for 18 years. It is not a “luxury” resort but it is a clean, comfortable, economical and very friendly “dive” resort and we would not hesitate to return. Some of the chalets are beginning to show some signs of age. Our first chalet was a single unit near the ocean that was gorgeous. It was built almost entirely of native hardwood (walls, floor, veranda) with an attached Balinese-style outdoor bath. In addition to a large ceiling fan it also had A/C that pumped lots of cold air. Turns out we only used the A/C during the daytime because at night it was quite comfortable with only the ceiling fan. The second time we stayed there was for 1 night when we got off the M/V Serenade after our liveboard cruise. This time we were in a duplex unit with friends of ours in the adjoining unit. The A/Cs did not work in either unit. It was too late in the day to fix the A/Cs so the resort brought us a fan that provided some relief. Some of the other divers that had been on the M/V Serenade with us also spent the night at MUREX Dive Resort and while their unit had an A/C that worked they didn’t have any hot water. The resort is located about a 30-minute taxi (US \$3-4) ride from downtown Manado if you want to do some shopping or attempt to find some local nightlife.

**Dive Resort Food** – all meals were served buffet-buffet style and there was always plenty of food. Most of the meals were variations of local, Indonesian-style cooking with seasoning (read “hotness”) toned down for the Western palate. For breakfast there was always toast, cereal, eggs, occasionally French toast or hotcakes, fresh fruit and 1 of 2 Indonesian staples (either fried rice or fried noodles). Lunch and dinner usually consisted of several vegetable dishes, a fish dish, a chicken dish and either a beef or pork dish plus soup with dinner. Again there was always fresh fruit and usually some type of desert. If you are lucky enough to be there on a Friday night (we

were) they usually have a beach party/BBQ. The night we were there the main course was suckling pig and a type of BBQ beef. For those of you that are beer drinkers, they also always had plenty of cold beer available. A large bottle (approximately 24oz) of Bintang beer goes for about \$US 2.25.

**Liveaboard (M/V Serenade)** – is a 12-year old liveaboard that has been plying these islands for its entire existence. It can accommodate 12 guests but there were only 9 guests on our trip. From what we saw during our trip and the trip before and after us, most of the guests are European. On this trip we had divers from Germany, U.S. (my wife and myself) and a couple from Japan (our friends). If you are looking for a luxury liveaboard (like the Aggressor or Peter Hughes boats) this is not the boat for you. Also, if you are prone to get seasick easily this is probably not the boat for you because it has a very shallow draft of 1.5m (approx 5 ft) and it doesn't take much wind or wave action to get it doing a lively "rock & roll motion". My recommendation is that you always keep a solid grip on something with one of your hands while moving around the boat, especially when the boat is moving. That said, we were very pleased with the boat and our trip. The boat's crew and dive masters were fantastic. They were very helpful, always lending a hand and quite willing to do whatever we asked of them as long as it didn't endanger life or limb. We felt almost like we were part of the crew. All of the cabins I saw had 2 bunks, a lower double bunk and an upper single bunk. My wife and I shared the lower bunk and used the upper bunk for storage. There is also some room for storage under the lower bunk and in a built-in shelf area. I was happy with the length of the bunks. I am 6' 1" and could completely stretch out without touching the end of the bunk. Each cabin had an ensuite bath with toilet, washbasin and coldwater shower. Our bathroom area had just been painted and was quite slippery when wet (which was almost always the case when doing 4 dives a day). My wife slipped while using stepping out of the bathroom area which resulted in a pretty severely scraped and bruised shin but ice and ibuprofen saved the day (although it did turn a nasty looking purple for a few days). All cabins have locks but we never bothered to lock our door for the duration of the trip. There is a hot water shower on the aft deck for use after your last dive of the day. There is also a small, fresh-water rinse tank on the aft deck for rinsing computers and camera gear. If there are more than 3 serious photographers onboard the rinse tank will get crowded quickly. There is no dedicated camera table on the boat but there is a large, raised, covered area in bow directly in front of the bridge that works quite well and then there are always the 2 tables in the dining area that can be used when people aren't eating. Most of the cabins share an A/C with the adjacent cabin. In our case we had the A/C controls on our side but got only minimal cold air while the adjacent cabin got lots of cold air. This was OK with us because we prefer not to use A/C when diving because it tends to cause congestion for both of us so we just opened the cabin windows. Cabin selection is done by drawing #s out of a hat so that no one can complain about not getting the better cabins. Cabins can be swapped after the drawing if the parties involved are amenable. There are pros and cons to which are better cabins, fore or aft. The forward cabins are quieter because they are furthest from the engine room but they also feel the most ship's motion. You don't feel as much ship's movement in the after cabins but they are noisy because they are closer to the engine room and the air compressor. The boat typically cruised between islands at night, usually starting to move around 2:00 AM and that can be an irritant for those in the after cabins. There are transformers available for running battery chargers in the dining area that can accommodate either 110v or 220v chargers. It is highly recommended that you use these because they provide much smoother, cleaner power than the standard ship's power.

<http://www.manado-liveaboards.com/>

<http://www.manado-liveaboards.com/images/serenade-big.jpg>

<http://www.manado-liveaboards.com/serenade.html>

[http://www.murexdive.com/MUREX\\_liveboards\\_seranade.html](http://www.murexdive.com/MUREX_liveboards_seranade.html)

**Liveboard Food** – all meals were served home-style at the table and there was always plenty of food. The food was very similar to what was served at the MUREX Dive Resort with maybe slightly less variety. The ship's cook was amazing in that he was able to prepare all of this food on a single, 2-burner gas range. That he could provide the selection that he did was amazing. Again, there was also always had plenty of cold beer available. A large bottle (approximately 24oz) of Bintang beer goes for about \$US 2.25. Coke was also available. If you want something other than coke you need to bring your own or else make arrangements with MUREX ahead of time.

### **FINALLY – THE DIVING**

MUREX dive guides from both the shore resort and on the M/V Serenade were great and I can't say enough about how helpful they were. They gave excellent pre-dive briefs and did their best to try to fill everyone's request. The "rule" was a maximum dive depth of 30m/100' but that was not rigidly enforced if the divemaster felt you were competent divers. Bottom time typically was 60 minutes (give or take a few) or 500 psi, whichever came first.

### **Day One**

Dive One – Bunaken Marine Park, Molas Shipwreck (described as either a steel-hulled Dutch merchant or a Chinese commercial iron ship)

- 112 feet for 42 minutes
- Ok but not much of a shipwreck after having been to Truk
- Visibility – poor to fair
- After touring the wreck swam over to a shallower reef for the remainder of the dive
- Saw a black tip shark, a nice-size Napoleon wrasse, a bumphead parrot fish and several nudibranches

Dive Two – Bunaken Marine Park, Mandolin Point, vertical wall

- 78 feet for 60 minutes
- Visibility – good
- What was to become what I will refer to from now on as a typical Bunaken wall dive (beautiful coral covered wall with visibility approaching 30 meters and lots of beautiful reef fish)
- All of the regular characters in abundance (wrasses, fusiliers, butterfly, banner, damsel and angel fish, etc) along with a decent sized green sea turtle, scorpion fish and several nudibranches

Dive Three – Bunaken Marine Park, Fukui Point, slope covered in branching hard corals

- 63 feet for 59 minutes
- Visibility – fair
- Saw a huge giant clam (tridacna) and several giant barrel sponges. Coral around the giant clam is pretty beat up which can probably be attributed to a large # of divers (with poor buoyancy control) that are taken to see the clam
- Didn't make any dive log entry regarding seeing anything remarkable other than the giant clam

### **Day Two**

Dive One – Bunaken Marine Park, Sachiko's Point, vertical wall

- 100 feet for 61 minutes
- Typical Bunaken wall dive

- Visibility – good
- All of the regular characters in abundance (wrasses, fusiliers, butterfly, banner, damsel and angel fish, etc)
- In addition saw a large Napoleon wrasse, green turtle, large yellowfin tuna and several nudibranchs

Dive Two – Bunaken Marine Park, Likuan II, vertical wall

- 78 feet for 60 minutes
- Typical Bunaken wall dive
- Visibility – good
- All of the regular characters in abundance (wrasses, fusiliers, butterfly, banner, damsel and angel fish, etc)
- In addition saw a decent sized green sea turtle, a very large Napoleon wrasse, scorpion fish, a school of black snappers and several nudibranches

Dive Three – Bunaken Marine Park, Tanjung Pisok, sloping reef that steps down with lots of good table coral

- 66 feet for 48 minutes
- Visibility – fair
- This site is known for sometimes having strong currents. It lived up to its reputation today. My guess is the current was running at about 3 knots
- There were lots of tropical fish in the water but we were moving so fast I didn't really have a chance to concentrate on observing our fishy friends.
- This looks like it would be a good site when the current isn't ripping

### **Day Three**

Dive One – Bunaken Marine Park, Pangulingan, sandy slope with large rocks and coral heads

- 103 feet for 60 minutes
- Visibility – good
- Lots of butterfly fish
- In addition saw a large Napoleon wrasse, a dog tooth tuna and several nudibranches
- This is supposed to be a very good dive when there is a current but we had little to no current and the larger fish (barracuda, jacks, sharks) must have been on a holiday

Dive Two – Bunaken Marine Park, Mukagaraja (near Negiri), vertical wall

- 81 feet for 62 minutes
- Typical Bunaken wall dive
- Visibility – good
- Lots of butterfly fish and some angel fish
- Nothing to report in the “big” fish category

Dive Three – Bunaken Marine Park, Likuan III, vertical wall

- 76 feet for 61 minutes
- Typical Bunaken wall dive
- Visibility – good
- Nothing to report in the “big” fish category. Overall an uninspiring dive on this day but I'm told this is usually a pretty good dive

## **Day Four**

Dive One – Sangihe Islands, Makalehi Island, Makalehi 2, fringing reef

- 104 feet for 58 minutes
- Visibility – good
- Large yellow fin tuna, very large school of butterfly fish, large puffer fish and several nudibranchs

Dive Two – Sangihe Islands, Makalehi Island, Uto

- This dive is done on an underwater volcano. The bottom of what looks to have been the caldron of the volcano is covered in sand and you can see gas bubbling up through the sand.
- 82 feet for 65 minutes
- Visibility – good
- Lots and lots of nudibranchs, lots of red-tooth triggerfish and one large scorpion fish

Dive Three – Sangihe Islands, Siau Island, Eddy Point, wall dive

- This is done as a great deep dive and supposed to be very good but since this was the 3<sup>rd</sup> dive of the day we only spent a few minutes at depth and spent most of our time off-gassing in the shallows
- 118 feet for 64 minutes
- Visibility – good
- Saw several large barracuda and a blue ribbon eel

Dive Four –Sangihe Islands, Siau Island, Batu Lehi, wall dive, night dive

- 55 feet for 59 minutes
- Visibility – good
- Lion fish, cuttlefish and a large crocodile fish

## **Day Five**

Dive One – Sangihe Islands, Mahangetang Island, Banua Wuhu underwater volcano

- 89 feet for 55 minutes
- Visibility – good
- Large jacks, several bumphead wrasse and lots of the usual tropicals on the western side of the volcano
- We had to wait until the local fisherman completed pulling their nets set over the dive site before we could dive. This was an amazing dive. The western slope of the volcano is covered in gorgeous corals and then as you swim around to the eastern side of the volcano the corals disappear and the slope of the volcano is covered in rocks and boulders including some really huge ones. There is no coral growing here and the surface of everything is covered in what looks to be some type of reddish, yellow algae. This probably is the result of all of the hot water vents in this area where you can see and feel the hot water as it escapes from between the rocks and also lots of gas bubbles.

Dive Two – Sangihe Islands, Mahangetang Island, Om Zonee, fringing coral reef

- 89 feet for 56 minutes
- Visibility – fair
- Saw a large bumphead parrot fish and a Napoleon wrasse
- We made a mistake with this dive. We were offered the chance to do a second dive on the U/W volcano or a shallower dive on the reef closer to the island. The majority voted to move in closer to shore because the seas were pretty rough over the volcano. The coral was in very bad shape. Lots of dead corals and crown of thorns everywhere we looked.

Note: This is as far north as we got on this trip because of the prevailing winds from the south and made for some very large seas and we decided to start back to the south before things got worse.

Dive Three – Sangihe Islands, Siau Island, Batu Bamu, wall dive

- 86 feet for 52 minutes
- Visibility – good
- Leaf fish, zebra moray eel, harlequin pipe fish, lion fish
- After the dive the boat men took us to a natural hot spring at the shore end of a very narrow inlet. The warm water felt great.

Dive Four – Sangihe Islands, Siau Island, Batu Lehi, wall dive, night dive

- 56 feet for 52 minutes
- Visibility – good
- Double-spot lion fish, stone fish, decorator crab carrying a large sponge on top of its shell, blue-spotted ray

### **Day Six**

Dive One – Sangihe Islands, Ruang Island, New Lava Flow, steep slope

- 115 feet for 59 minutes
- Visibility – good
- Large barrel sponges, yellowfin tuna, 4 gorgeous cuttlefish, a large bright yellow and black nudibranch (notodoris minor), seahorse, butterfly fish, banner fish and several types of unicorn fish

Dive Two – Sangihe Islands, Ruang Island, Serenade Critters, steep slope to wall

- 72 feet for 57 minutes
- Visibility – good
- Very nice coral. Saw a blue ribbon eel, juvenile blue ribbon eel, leaf fish and a spotted soap fish

Dive Three – Sangihe Islands, Biaro Island, Lanango, shallow with sloping bottom

- 71 feet for 55 minutes
- Visibility – good
- Smallscale scorpion fish, juvenile blue ribbon eel, commensal shrimp on an anenome

## **Day Seven**

Dive One – Lembeh Strait, Jiko Aras, Jahir, muck diving

- 66 feet for 68 minutes
- Visibility – fair
- Amazing dive!!! Ghost pipefish, juvenile zebra bat fish, several nudibranchs, snake eel, a pair of side-by-side cockatoo wasp fish, bangai cardinal fish, sea robin and a peacock flounder

Dive Two – Lembeh Strait, Magic Crack, muck diving

- 87 feet for 58 minutes
- Visibility – fair
- Another amazing dive!!! Several ornate ghost pipe fish, 3 large frog fish (black, yellow & brown), juvenile sweetlips, 3 thorny seahorses and what appeared to be a nudibranch orgy consisting of 4 nudibranches (*hyseleodoris bullocki*) all in very close proximity to each other

NOTE: We took a tour of the Lembeh Resort. This is an absolutely gorgeous, upscale resort. At the time we toured the resort MUREX was in charge of the diving for the resort.

Dive Three – Lembeh Strait, Hairball, muck diving

- 69 feet for 52 minutes
- Visibility – fair
- Another amazing dive!!! Zebra seahorse, yellow seahorse, cockatoo wasp fish, Ambon scorpion fish, finger dragonet, hairy frog fish, zebra crab

Dive Four – Lembeh Strait, Nudi Falls, muck diving, night dive

- 70 feet for 43 minutes
- Visibility – fair
- Another amazing dive!!! Flame fire starshell (absolutely amazing site to see want looks like bolts of lightning flashing back and forth inside the shell), juvenile barramundi cod, razor fish, pygmy seahorse, orange-banded pipe fish, decorator crab carrying a fire urchin on its back, and some type of very small white cuttlefish

## **Day Eight**

Dive One – Bangka Island, Batu Gasoh, pinnacles/drift dive

- 107 feet for 60 minutes
- Visibility – great
- Gorgeous soft corals, blue-spotted stingray, several eggshell cowries, tiger cowrie, large yellow and black nudibranch (*notodoris minor*), fire gobie, octopus and large grouper

Dive Two – Bangka Island, Sahuang, series of large underwater boulders/wall

- 92 feet for 54 minutes
- Visibility – great
- Gorgeous soft corals and beautiful sea fans, 2 turtles, bumphead wrasse, large yellow and black nudibranch (*notodoris minor*), white tip shark (the first one of our trip)

Dive Three – Pulisan, Batu Mandi (near MUREX's Pulisan Resort), sloping reef

- 81 feet for 54 minutes
- Visibility – great
- Gorgeous bright yellow box fish and a giant yellow frog fish

Dive Four – Bangka Island, Tanjung Usi, night dive

- 48 feet for 58 minutes
- Visibility – fair
- Giant black frog fish, giant yellow frog fish and an eggshell cowrie

**Day Nine (last day of diving before returning to MUREX Resort and then home)**

Dive One – Bunaken Marine Park, Nain Island, Batu Kapal, pinnacle/wall dive

- Very early morning (6:00 AM) dive to a pinnacle separated from the island by a deep canyon in hopes of seeing hammerhead sharks
- 121 feet for 42 minutes
- Visibility – great
- Dropped to the top of the pinnacle for about 5 minutes; saw no hammerheads; swam back to the island and started our gradual ascent along the wall. On the way up we first saw a thresher shark (our first and it was a gorgeous sight to see) silhouetted above as it swam overhead. No sooner that it had cleared and we saw 4 great hammerheads approaching from ahead and slightly above us. They were about 10 feet in length and the closest one came to about 12-15 feet from us before they turned and swam off the way they came. This dive had to be the high point of the trip.

Note: While motoring to our next dive sight we encountered multiple pods of dolphins that swam with the boat. There more dolphins than we could even begin to count. They were everywhere.

Dive Two – Bunaken Marine Park, Montehage Island, Barakuda Point, wall dive

- 94 feet for 45 minutes
- Visibility – great
- Several Great Pacific barracuda, a school of jacks, a school of bumphead wrasse and a wahoo (a very sleek, powerful fish and another first for me not having ever seen one other than on the end of a fishing line or on my plate)

Dive Three – Bunaken Marine Park, Manado Tua Island, Tanjung Kopi, slope/wall dive

- 91 feet for 47 minutes
- Visibility – great
- 4 large Napoleon wrasse, a school of chevron barracuda, a school of jacks and another wahoo

This was the end of our diving. From here it was back to MUREX Resort for one night, flight to Singapore for one night and a good (but too short) visit with some friends that live there and then back to San Diego and work.

The trip was fantastic. My only disappoint was that I was expecting to see more large fish (sharks, trevally, tuna, etc.) while we cruised the island chain north of Bunaken, especially in that we didn't

see much fishing activity while we were there. I guess it could have just been bad timing on our parts. **I would be ready to do this trip again in a heartbeat.**