

text & photographs by MICHAEL AW

# BALI

SOMETHING OLD,  
SOMETHING NEW,  
ALWAYS PREDICTABLE



**BALI** — the images flash in my mind of majestic volcanoes, traditional architecture, beautiful offerings of flowers, thousands of colourful fishes, shimmering blue waters behind tall forests of soft corals, and secret bays of mysterious critters as yet unknown to science. Resilient to the after-effects of the October 2002 bombing, Kuta now seem fresh, new and vibrant with the latest surf fashion, designer labels and delicate works of art on canvas, wood and stone. It is time to rediscover Bali, the island of the gods and part of the richest reef system of the world.



Big-eye jacks swirl in Tulamben Bay.

- Seraya Secrets Wonders
1. Tiger Shrimp.
  2. Whip goby and Sponge shrimp.
  3. Reef crab.
  4. Leaf fish
  5. Too many nudibranchs to identify
  6. Emperor shrimps on sea star.

**[ I BEGAN MY JOURNEY** on board the Queen of the Sea, a Phinisi live-aboard vessel which promises unlimited diving in five-star luxury. The plan was to circumnavigate the island diving some old sites at Nusa Penida, Tulamben, Lovina and Menjangan and hopefully meet up with old friends along the way together with finding some new ones. Well, that was the plan anyway and I knew I would not be disappointed.

International tourism once yielded over one million visitors per year to Bali, inevitably causing many experienced divers to snub Bali for more “off the beaten track” destinations in Indonesia. In truth, many are oblivious to the fact that the dive sites in Bali, in terms of quality and excitement, are among the richest and the most exciting in the world.

First stop, Nusa Penida and Lembongan islands. Here lie my favourite sites, especially in the months of July to September when the oceanic Sunfish are predictably found in deep water. I was happy to find that the coral meadows are still in a pristine state since my last visit in 2001. There were no signs of bleaching and tourist damage was not significant. Notably, this area is incessantly flushed by huge volumes of water between the Indian Ocean and Java Sea. Deep icy ocean upwellings, down-wellings and fast currents replenish the reef systems with rich nutrients. At times diving can be treacherous for the inexperienced but a serious jolt of adrenaline for the well prepared. When in the right mix, diving Lembongan and Nusa Penida is like a ride in Never-Never Land, almost surreal.

The approach to Tulamben from the sea is a sight to behold; the mighty Gunung Agung, the “navel of the world” and Bali’s “mother mountain”, rises impressively to 3,142 metres against a hazy, pale blue sky. Tulamben Bay is famous. Just off the shore lies the wreck of USAT Liberty. It is not only Indonesia’s most dived site, it may be the most often dived wreck in the world. Between 150–200 divers visit this site



**A NIGHT DIVE IS A MUST FOR A SURREALISTIC EXPERIENCE. DESCEND TO 30 METRES, FACE THE WALL, SWITCH OFF THE TORCH AND WATCH. MILLIONS OF TINY GREEN BULBS MAGICALLY APPEAR TO PERFORM A SHOW OF TWINKLING ZIG-ZAGGING LIGHTS.**

every day. However, it is neither the structure nor history that attracts divers from all over the world. The fact that the Liberty rests at an accessible depth and boasts an incredible density and variety of marine life have made it the perfect wreck for sport divers. The vessel celebrates the richness of Indonesia’s marine bio-diversity and the ease of diving at depths between five and 30 metres has a lot to do with its popularity. The most obvious attraction on the wreck is the sheer number and variety of fish; friendly fishes that approach up close and personal. Sergeant-major damselfish, Crescent wrasse and unicornfish often swim right up to divers, to enquire for a free feed. The bigger fishes, Humphead parrotfish, Oriental sweetlips, rabbitfish, Coral trout and groupers sometimes hover in mid-water making great subjects for fish portraits.

Though only a few table-sized hard corals are found on the outer edge, the superstructure is heavily colonised with soft corals, gorgonian fans and tall black and green coral trees, stinging hydrozoans and colourful sponges. The Liberty’s gun is still intact on the stern at 28 metres, completely encrusted with sessile animals and sea fans. At 30 metres the reef is prolific with red sea whips, huge barrel sponges, huge sea fans, wandering mantis shrimp and more; an underwater photographer’s paradise. On this trip with Queen of the Sea, I celebrated my 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary dive on the Liberty, the first was in 1989. I was delighted to find that the school of Big-eyed jacks have grown; they now have split into respective schools of large adults and young adults.

Ironically, the Liberty’s fame overshadows the rest of the natural marvels that can be found at Tulamben, all unique to this bay; a bay of striking contrasts, of



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1. Gorgonian shrimp, Seraya Secrets.
2. Softcoral shrimp, Seraya Secrets.
3. Spider crab, Seraya Secrets.

ruggedness, of hydrographic culture, of rich biodiversity and of tranquility. On the eastern end of Tulamben bay, beneath the temple, a wall plunges from near the surface to beyond 60 metres. This is the icon of wall diving. The wall is completely occupied with huge barrel sponges, coral trees, oversized gorgonian fans — one prominently positioned on a ledge at 30 metres is more than three metres high and adorned with Long-nosed hawkfish and canary yellow damselfish.

Within numerous caverns and crevices are Thorny oysters, Tubastraea corals, crabs and shrimps sharing homes with squirrelfish, Coral trout, blennies and scorpionfish. Among fish experts, this wall is notoriously famous for harbouring hard to find and hard to photograph species including the Comet (*Calloplepsiops altivelis*), a fish with elaborate finnage and a false eyespot. Sunfish (*Mola Mola*), Hammerhead sharks and Whale sharks have all been sighted off this site. A night dive is a must for a surrealistic experience. Descend to 30 metres, face the wall, switch off the torch and watch. Millions of tiny green bulbs magically appear to perform a show of twinkling zig-zagging lights. These are the Anomalops, the fish of the night that possess a bioluminescent organ beneath each eye.

Sometimes, unexpectedly, one will stumble upon a gold mine and, if you are shortsighted, and I mean literally, you may even miss the opportunity. It was timely for us to visit Patrick Swartz, a Swiss expat who has set up a small diving resort with his wife some three kilometres from Tulamben Bay. Patrick, who is also a PADI instructor, thought nothing much of the seemingly mundane black sand slope right on his doorstep. So, for the past year or so he has only dived with his guests and divemaster at the drop-off wall and wreck at Tulamben Bay, 10 minutes away from his beach-front property. Two months ago his divemaster, Christiane Waldrich, decided that 10 minutes to the dive sites is a pretty big inconvenience in life. One afternoon, armed with her tiny camera, she walked off the coarse sand beach to discover a heaven of critters, odd-balls and some extravagant varieties of nudibranch. On my first dive, I blew off 132 frames, equivalent to 3.6 rolls of film in just 30 minutes. This

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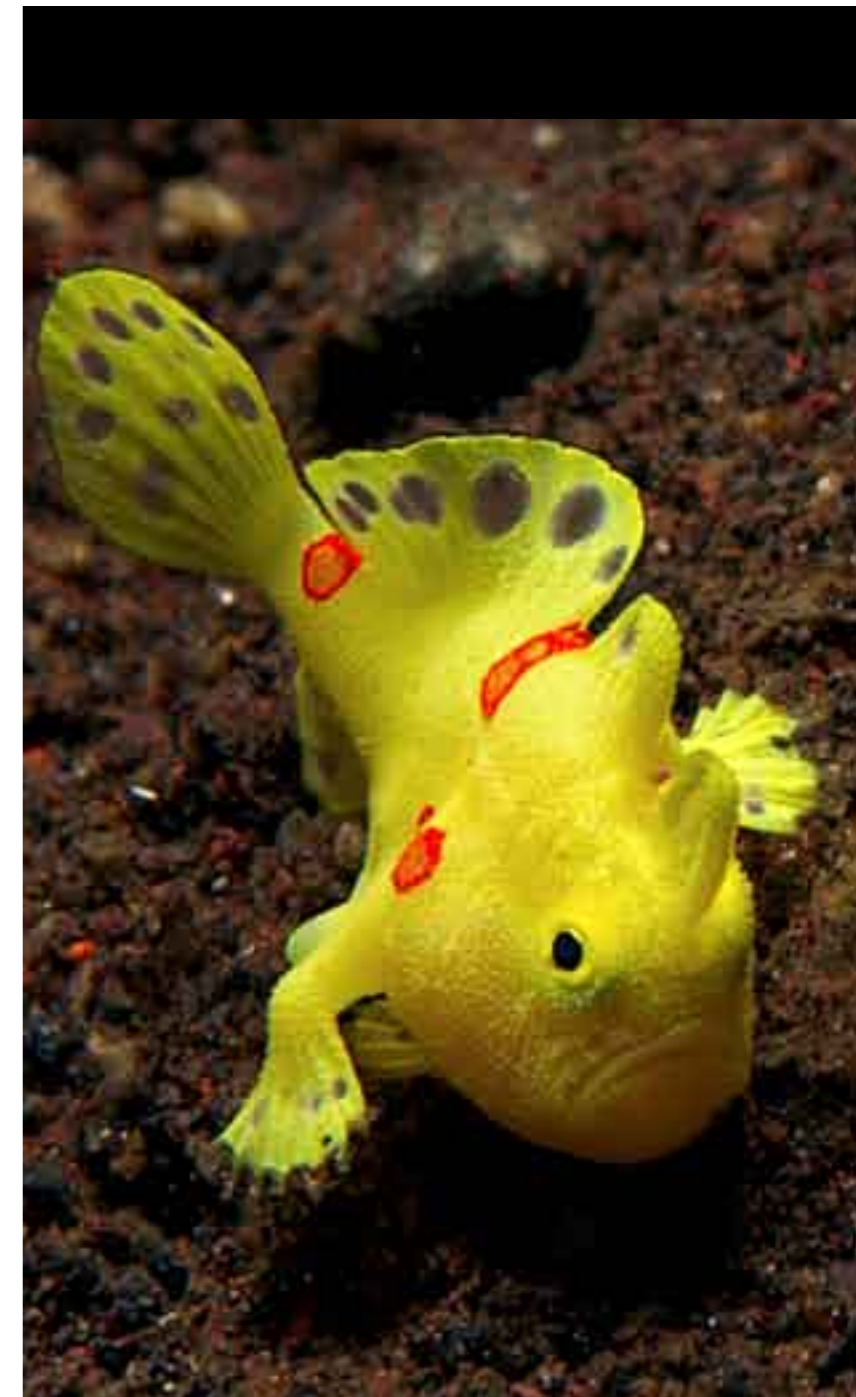
new hot-spot of critters is without a doubt among the best in the world, matching sites of Lembah Strait and Milne Bay in Papua New Guinea.

Christiane's portfolio of nudibranch and flatworms is impressive; there must be over 300 species and many of them unidentified. From one afternoon dive, I recorded 41 species, beating a personal record of 28 off Nudi Fall at Lembah Strait. Minuscule orange and yellow frogfish are not uncommon, but one with transparent polka dot dorsal fins is a species that has yet to be published in any identification books and is not known to Dr Gerry Allen, one of the world's best ichthyologists.

Of course, there are the usual suspects — Ghost pipefish, Bobbitt worms, Boxer crabs, octopus, Ornamental squid, sand divers, frogfishes, stonefish, sand eels, sand anemones, tons and tons of strange crabs, shrimps, worms and I was fascinated to photograph one of the most exquisite psychedelic coloured Tiger shrimp (*Phyllognathia ceratophthalma*).

I was so impressed with this hot-spot, which we now call Seraya Secrets, named for Patrick Swartz's resort, that of course I stayed to continue diving there for the next three days, abruptly putting an end to the live-aboard trip and my intention to circumnavigate the island of Bali. I am sure news will travel fast through cyberspace and hundreds of macro enthusiasts will land on Patrick's doorstep in a flash to discover the critters of Seraya Secrets.

As I have learnt, Bali remains predictable — the island oozes with enchanting culture, the people are the most charming within a fabric of diverse culture in a country of 190 million, and the sea predictably promises surprise after surprise.



SOMETHING NEW — FROGFISH WITH SEE THRU POLKA DOTS DORSAL FIN

