

Manado Over The Edge



The dolphins race just below the surface, the grey and black striped bodies twist, turn and at times swim upside down. In the few minutes they're with us, shyer members of the pod are glimpsed much deeper down. And as quickly as they came, they're gone. Peeling away in a tight formation with the rest of their pod, they head off at incredible speed and begin leaping clear of the water. The sight of a hundred or more intermittently airborne dolphins leaves us all ecstatic and Alex's smile tells its own story.

Manado Tua draws near, one of the five islands of the Bunaken Marine Reserve. We've been staying at Murex Dive Resort just south of Manado, diving daily around the islands of the Marine Reserve just a few kilometres offshore. We're going to dive off Pangulingan a village on Manado Tua's north shore.

The island's extinct volcanic cone rises high above us as our guide Adri describes the dive to our group.

We fin down a steeply sloping wall in crystal clear conditions. A few bommies interrupt the mostly-even bottom terrain with colourful crinoids and small gorgonia corals, while beyond 25 metres sponges and seawhips sprout from the bottom. Reef meets sand at 40 metres down; here a huge fan coral hangs horizontally from the reef. The sea above us appears to be filled with fish; surgeonfish, fusiliers and unicorn fish swirl above us, while out over the sand a school of barracuda cruise past inquisitively.

Along the reef a ridge with vertical walls protrudes out onto the sand; one face is covered with long seawhips. We ascend from here back to the reef edge in only eight metres, on the way stopping to watch a mantis shrimp hunting for food in a small sand patch. The shallows are filled with exquisite hard coral growth → many large porites bommies and boulders are covered with plate corals. Some boulders are topped with anemones, each seems to have a different species of anemone fish swimming among their tentacles.



We pull up at a brain coral to photograph a pair of small gobies darting among the corals tiny ridges. An occasional sulphur-coloured gorgonia fan spouts from the sides of some higher rocks. Soft corals in shades of brown cover some of the sandy areas. Schools of small fish of every description swim among the corals - pyramid butterflyfish, basslets, parrotfish and damsels. Lizardfish loaf around on small rocks and corals, lionfish hover around some shady ledges.



Out on the sandy patches fire gobies and shrimp gobies dive in and out of their sand burrows. A goatfish sifts through a sand patch while nearby a scorpionfish sits motionless and well camouflaged, except for its eye movements. Just below the surface a school of tiny baitfish swim nervously in unison, while two large trevally patrol their perimeter searching for stragglers. We cruise the shallows until our air runs low and then drift along in a gentle current at three metres, watching the scenery pass below us until the boat appears above us.

On-board the crew had laid out lunch for us under the shaded deck. While they changed our tanks, we feasted on baked chili fish, stir fried vegetables, jasmine rice,

spicy chicken, fresh fruit and cold drinks. I took a quick nap in the sun out on the foredeck. The afternoon saw us heading to nearby Bunaken Island for Liang Cove at Lekuan Wall. This vertical dropoff is a couple of hundred metres from Bunaken's south coast and has three different dive sites known as Lekuan 1, 2 and 3. The edge of the reef varies between one and three metres deep and is covered in hard corals. We descended to 20 metres where the sheer rock wall was undercut by a ledge. Although only a couple of metres deep, it harboured orange soft corals, pink hydroids, small gorgonia fans and thorny oysters. The wall was home to lots of reef fish including some larger parrotfish and a couple of maori wrasse.

We drifted in a moderate current down to 25 metres, below us the wall continued to 40metres. Off this sheer face a dense school of black snapper drifted past. A whitetip reef shark swam up to investigate us and a pair of giant trevally cruised in close. Here and there the wall face cut back into the reef and formed sheltered coves and



overhangs ideal areas to escape the current and explore mini caves and study the abundant macro marine life; sea stars, brittle stars, crinoids, ascidians, sponges, crabs, tiny blennies and moray eels. The dive ended in the shallows along the edge of the reef, which was just as interesting. Among the hard corals were hermit crabs, anemones, scorpion fish and sea cucumbers. Basslets, damsels, butterflyfish and hawkfish flitted around the coral's branches.

Each of the Lekuan dive sites has something special; Lekuan 1 has a group of young whitetip sharks residing in a shallow ledge at 26 metres; Lekuan 2 has big schools of fusiliers and surgeonfish, with turtles often making an appearance. Lekuan 3 has a very sculpted wall with lots of overhangs, ledges and caves, where many varieties of fish shelter, plus a lot of sponge growth. A school of bumphead parrot fish are regularly seen feeding along the shallow reef top of Lekuan 2 and 3.

We visited as many of the dive sites in the Marine Reserve as we could, each had something special, among our favourites were:
Fukui Point on Bunaken Island had schools of big eye trevally and a group of giant clams on its hard coral and sand slopes. We watched the trevally feeding on a school of baitfish above a ridge at the end of the point.



Siladen Island had brilliant coloured crinoids along the edge of a sheer wall, with crystal clear water. Down deep a couple of big soft corals hung from the wall. Along its shallow reef top were an incredible variety of hard and soft corals - a snorkellers dream.

Sachiko's Point on the north-east tip of Bunaken Island was a drift dive along a vertical wall. Down deep at 30+ metres we found an undercut ledge with barrel sponges and coloured soft corals. Here a group of four giant trevally came close to watch us.



Also at Bunaken Island was one of my favourites sites. Alung Banua is a point in the reef-wall just west of the Lekuan sites. Along this reef are a couple of huge ledges and some area's where the wall is undercut, forming big overhangs. The shallows are very pretty with big schools of butterflyfish and bream, sea snakes are common here. We surprised a reef shark at one ledge, he took off so fast that its escort remora was left behind. The remora decided to accompany us for the rest of the dive; first it sucked onto my son Mike's tank, later on to my shoulder.

At Montehage Island we did an exploratory dive off the southeast coast. A short coral

wall led down to 15 metres, onto a sand bottom dotted with hard corals. Lots of blue spotted stingrays hid under ledges along with coral cod and angelfish. Some large gorgonia fans sprouted from the reef. Fifty metres out from the wall was another dropoff that began at 30metres, but we didn't have time to go any further.

Off Manado Tua's southern shore, we dived directly offshore from a church located in a small village at a dive site named Muka Geraja. This was another wall dive, but with vertical gullies cutting back into the reef face. Big schools of fusiliers and surgeonfish paraded along the reef edge, which had some small overhangs and ledges.

There's something special about swimming over the edge of a sheer dropoff with the deep blue of an unknown depth below. I can think of no-where better to experience this than on the walls of the Bunaken Marine Reserve.

The rock and coral reef in front of Murex turned up some interesting marine life - moray eels, lionfish, devilfish and Spanish dancers, various hermit, spider, decorator and anemone crabs, a tiny white octopus, schools of squid, seasnakes, huge basket stars, scorpion fish and - the list goes on.

This is my favourite night-dive site anywhere. Not just for the diving, but also for its easy entry down a sloping sand ramp, lights and shower on-shore, plus a bench to prepare dive and camera equipment. Minimal currents and only a short swim to the shallow reef. The best part? Your room and dinner are only 20 metres walk from the entry/exit.

Top Side -

On non-diving days we explored the hills and volcanoes east of Manado in the Minahasa area. Small villages are set among picturesque rice fields and farmland in the Minahasan hills. We visited Tondano where a huge lake fills the caldera of an extinct volcano, its shores dotted with small villages.

Some of the lakes resident's are fishermen who catch carp and farm water plants that grow around the shores of the freshwater lake.

In Manado City, extremely friendly city-folk guided us to the area's supermarket's, souvenir shops and other places of interest, such as the bakery. Most facilities for tourists are available in the city; photo shops, post office, telephone, internet cafe, airline offices and bookstores. The city has a couple of markets the fish market near the port is a real eye-opener for first-time visitors to Indonesia. The Pasar 45 market at the north end of town is a great place to buy clothes or momentos and experience an Indonesian market!

Night time at Murex Resort was time to reminisce on the days activities. The central dining area is a great social gathering place while devouring a delicious dinner. Even better were night-dives from the resort's beach area.

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