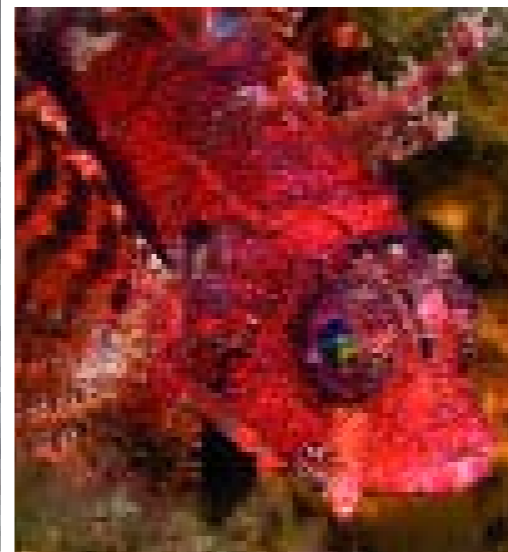


+ BALI'S NORTHEAST COAST FIRST SURFACED IN THE 80s DUE TO THE USAT LIBERTY WORLD WAR II SHIPWRECK JUST OFFSHORE. TULAMBEN HAS SINCE EMERGED AS BALI'S PRIME DIVE DESTINATION. THE APPEAL OF THE WRECK IS ITS INCREDIBLY VARIED FISH AND CRUSTACEANS, AS WELL AS THE BRILLIANT SOFT CORALS AND SEAFANS HANGING FROM EVERY SURFACE.

: TEXT AND IMAGES JEFF MULLINS © 2006

SERAYA SECRETS

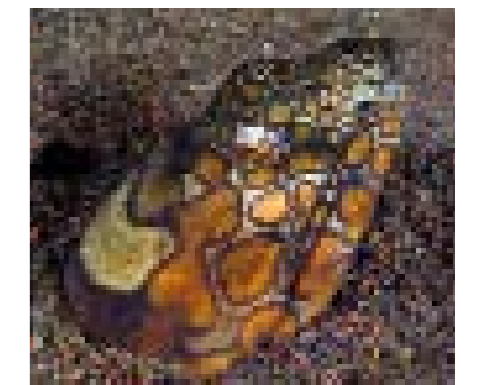


But nearby are a handful of sites with varied underwater terrain just as rich as the Liberty wreck. A shore dive in front of Scuba Seraya Resort a couple of kilometres along the coast is one of the more recently discovered sites. It also has some of the area's greatest underwater treasures. I first heard about this new 'muck' dive while guiding a group of divers around Bali. Very few divers had been there then, but the talk was all about frogfish, nudibranchs, shrimps and other critters.

I had to have a look. There was no indication on the surface of the richness below; just a plain black sand beach with small flotilla of traditional Balinese outrigger sailing boats (jukung) lining the shore. There were no headlands, rocky peninsulas or fringing reef and from the beach the water looked dark and unattractive. But once underwater, the visibility was surprisingly good – we could see each other more than 20 metres apart. A short distance in the bottom shifted from black sand to a mix of volcanic pebbles and rocks with a few tiny patches of hard coral plus the odd crinoid – fairly unimpressive. We descended a steep sand slope dotted with tiny outcrops of rock covered with sponges, crinoids and occasional small hard corals. At 25 metres there didn't seem to be much of interest, and after diving the Liberty Wreck or the Drop-Off at nearby Tulamben, I could be forgiven. These sites have dramatic reef structure and a huge wreck that's attracted abundant marine life – there's something of interest wherever you look. Conversely, the key to discovery at Seraya Secrets is to slow down, stop and look at each and every feature of the bottom. When we did stop at one small patch of orange sponges, tucked among the folds was a painted frogfish, one of the most colourful of the frogfish family. This orange beauty, with a face only a mother could love, was a real treasure

to me as over many years diving the Tulamben area I'd seen only a few frogfish. Close to the 'frogfish sponge' was a small algae-encrusted rock where a pair of nudibranchs fed. Right next to the nudibranchs was a seahorse, its tail curled around a small sponge. As we swam slowly away towards the next patch of growth, we spied a sea moth slowly wandering around the bottom in search of food. It was suddenly apparent to us where Seraya Secrets treasure's lay. Each small clump of growth is like an oasis where fish, crustaceans and other critters shelter, in fact even the sand has its community of unusual creatures.

On this first dive a whole new world was revealed. At one large rock we spotted a pair of tiny cuttlefish, each only 10 centimetres long. One hovered higher up as the 'look out' while the other searched every nook and cranny for food. We followed this pair for a few minutes watching their antics,



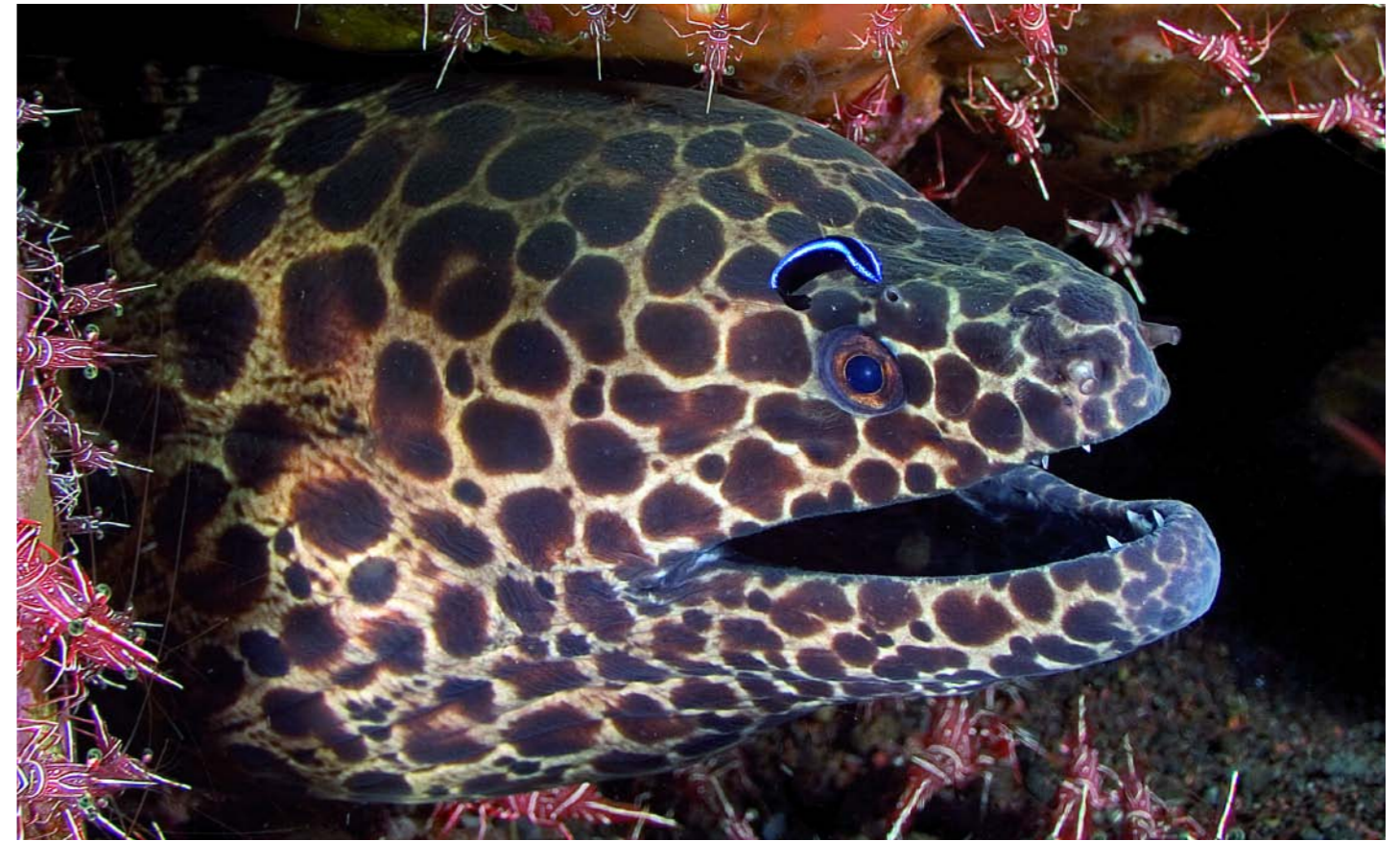
- From the left • Zebra lionfish have stunning colours inside its pectoral fins when swimming
- A variety of seahorses are mostly found in the deeper sections
- Sea urchins are abundant in the shallows, with needle shrimps among the spines
- The reddest of red lionfish accentuated by the dark sand habitat at Seraya Secrets
- Clown snake eel

“ We found and photographed nudibranchs, pipefish, seahorses, crinoid shrimps, more lionfish, leaf scorpionfish and eels. What a dive! ”



eventually leading us to a larger, more prominent rock with crinoids clinging to its top edge. A small opening at one end of the rock revealed the tail of a large black-blotched moray, at the other end was the toothy end of the eel. The moray, mouth wide open, was being tended by a pair of cleaner shrimps and was surrounded by dozens of hingebeak shrimps. The eel let us stop and take photos without withdrawing back into its hole, but the two tiny cuttles moved on, a little nervous of our fanged friend.

Our time in the deeper section soon ran out, but not before we found a clown snake eel with just its head showing above the sand, five more nudibranchs in different colours, plus lots of beautiful zebra lionfish that seemed to be hiding around most of the rocks. We ascended to a large dome shaped structure made of steel rods installed by the Scuba Seraya Resort management at around nine metres. This was to be a Bio-Reef project, but though it hadn't yet been connected to electricity, already had attracted lots of fish and invertebrates. A large barracuda hovered inside and a few

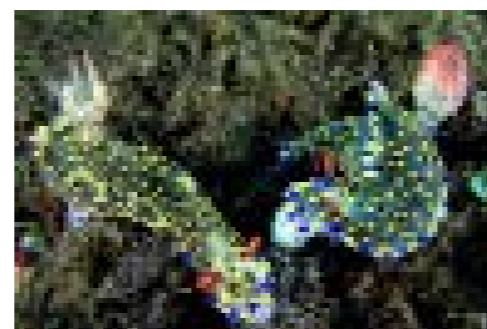


small acropora corals hosted some blue tang. At its base and among the rocks were white-eyed morays, groups of zebra lionfish, crabs and the stars of the show – harlequin shrimps! We counted four of these amazingly coloured shrimps around one of the dome's legs, then stumbled into another sheltering beneath a small staghorn coral close-by.

Those shallows also proved more interesting than we'd first thought. Among a bed of short olive-green sponges, a frogfish lay perfectly still. It was yellow in colour and big enough to spot easily, but if it weren't for its pectoral fins looking like small hands, we'd never have seen it. In only five metres was another frogfish, a little larger and orange in colour among rocks and pebbles where small sponges of exactly the same colour dotted the bottom.

Our safety stop lasted another 30 minutes – we found and photographed nudibranchs, pipefish, seahorses, crinoid shrimps, more lionfish, leaf scorpion fish and eels. What a dive!

We'd seen a lot more critters on a single dive at Seraya Secrets than we'd seen on numerous dives at Secret Bay at the western end of Bali, or at any one-dive



From top left • The harlequin shrimp is probably the most flamboyant of the shrimp family. As many as six can be found at Seraya Secrets • The shallows at Seraya Secrets are a haven for clown frogfish; this orange and yellow beauty was found in only 6 metres! • A pair of hypselodoris nudibranchs feeding on algae • Another of Seraya Secrets unusual nudibranchs • A black-blotched moray being cleaned by a cleaner wrasse, two banded coral shrimps and dozens of hinge beaked shrimps • Tiny scorpionfish and stonefish are found in the shallows among the small rocks and pebbles

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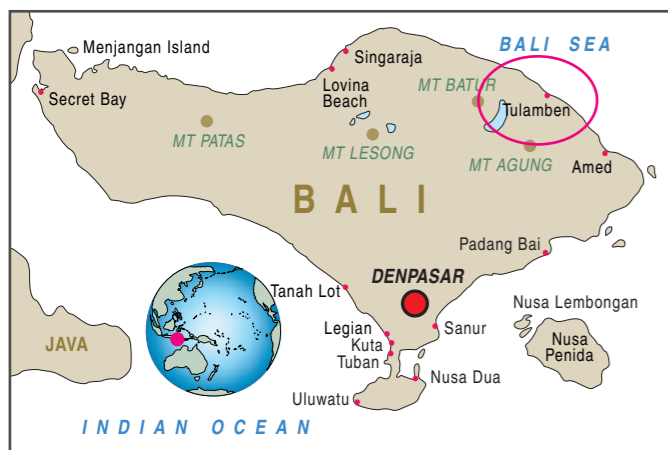
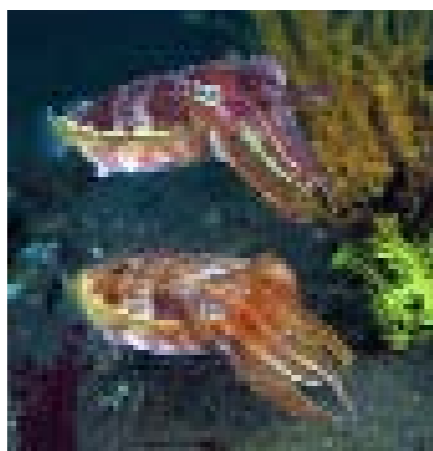
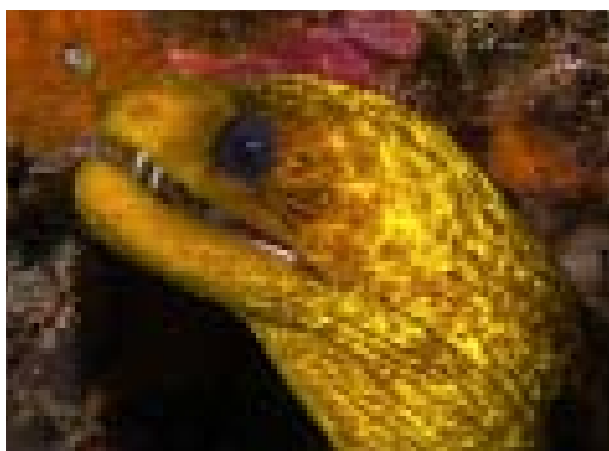
site at Lembah Strait in North Sulawesi. Secret Bay has been flagged as Bali's best critter dive and Lembah Strait as the muck diving capital of Indonesia. The rumours are true - Seraya Secrets is THE new Balinese-critter capital, with the added bonus of more great sites close at hand waiting to be explored.

FOOTNOTE Since this first dive, I've been back many times to Seraya Secrets and discovered more on each dive. Among our finds have been mantis shrimps, leaf scorpionfish, boxer crabs, mimic octopus, soft coral crabs, squat lobsters, giant frogfish and ghost pipefish. Other divers have also seen dolphins, manta rays and blacktip sharks!

DIVE SITE ACCESS As Seraya Secrets is directly in front of Scuba Seraya Resort, the best diving option is to stay at the resort www.scubaseraya.com or their dive centre at www.scubabali.com. Most other Tulamben dive operators also visit Seraya Secrets by either land or sea.

GETTING TO BALI All major regional airlines regularly access Bali. Check with Singapore Airlines, Silk Air, Qantas, Air New Zealand, Garuda, Philippine Airlines for special travel packages and best season to visit. Most dive travel agents can book your diving and accommodation, but make sure they've experienced the island and the diving firsthand.

Below • Eels appear to be hidden in nearly every rock in the shallows here. This yellow moray was constantly on the move and hard to approach. • One of this pair of cuttlefish hovered as a look-out, while the other searched for food. Divers often encounter balls of striped catfish in the deeper sections of the reef.



Jeff Mullins has been exploring the seas of Australia, southeast Asia and the South Pacific for 35 years. He began taking underwater photographs in 1976 and has since been published worldwide. Jeff was awarded the PADI Hallmark of Excellence Award for Outstanding Contribution to

Photo Journalism in 1995. A regular contributor to Sportdiving Magazine, his first article was published in 1979. Currently Jeff and his wife Dawn run dive tours from their property near Tulamben in Bali specialising in small groups of divers with an interest in underwater photography and marine life - www.reefimages.i8.com Jeff & Dawn have also recently published *Reef Wreck & Critter*, a pictorial guide to Tulamben's dive sites and marine life - www.tulamben.i8.com

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