

THE REEF SEEKER



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INDONESIA 2022 – TRIP REPORT

It wasn't the trip we expected but it was still really good nonetheless. (With a small hiccup on the way home.)

We just made our 10th journey to dive North Sulawesi, Indonesia, with our very good friends at Murex Resort in Manado (with side trips to Bangka and Lembeh). Since 2000, Murex has been our dive host/operator of choice in that area for reasons that will hopefully become apparent as you read through this report.

This was by far the largest group we've ever taken there. Normally, I like to keep the group size to about 8-10 (plus me) but in this post-COVID world, people are eager to travel again and our group swelled to 18. (Yikes!!!!) But it all worked out well as we basically divided into two groups for the trip, with me bouncing back and forth each day, diving with Group 1 one day and then Group A the other day. (Labeling them this way reduces the amount of times I have to hear, "I'm in the good group, right?")

And to be clear, we had two boats assigned to us, each boat with two Divemasters. Basrah Tan is our lead

DM, ably assisted by Stenley, Marcel, and Sandro. (And they all have sharp eyesight and know how to spot and where to find elusive critters like Leaf Scorpionfish, Orangutan Crabs, nudibranches of all sizes and colors, Pygmy Seahorses, Frogfish, and a host of other colorful critters, many of which you can see in the accompanying SmugMug slide show.) We had 9 divers on boat *Angelique* and 8 divers on *Marissa*, with me bouncing back and forth to make it 10 and 9. And on each boat, the groups were divided in half so each group was 4-5 divers with a DM.

Our divers consisted of some Murex veterans as well as some newbies. They were (in no particular order): Laurie Kasper, Tamar Toister, Shirley Parry, Marilyn Lawrence, Henry Gittler & Lisette Lieberman, Sue Krauth, Susy Horowitz, Rachel Capoccia, Ben & Emma Stelle, Eric Ernest & Amelia Mochny, Stuart Berryhill, David Mischel, Stacey Carr, Christine Riley, and me (Ken Kurtis – aka Opa Gila at Murex).

Getting there is an ordeal in itself but most of us took the Singapore Airlines nonstop redeye out of LAX which arrives in Singapore at 7:30AM, and then we connect at 9:25AM to the 3½-hour flight into Manado. It's another hour or so to clear Immigration and then Customs, and then yet another hour for the drive from the airport to Murex Resort, arriving around 4PM. But the staff is there to welcome you with open arms, bags are delivered to rooms, forms and waivers filled out,

unpacking done, and then it's time for dinner. So it's a long day but a good night's sleep gets everyone ready to go the next morning.

We've generally got multiple dive options, although weather impacted our choices during this trip. We can make a 40-minute run across to Bunaken Marine Park, which has fabulous vertical walls of healthy corals (and LOTS of turtles). Or we can opt to dive close in, and do dives up and down the Manado Bay coastline with a combination of corals and traditional Indonesian "muck" diving, which is diving over what appears to be lifeless sand and but then realizing there are amazing and fabulous creatures that are living there. Our other options were to travel (2-hour boat ride) to Bangka Island, home to strong currents and some of the prettiest soft corals I've ever seen, or do an overland dive (takes a little over an hour) to hop on a boat and explore the Lembeh Straits, the Godzilla of Muck Diving.

The generally planned dive day starts with breakfast at 7AM, boats leaving at 8:15AM to do two dives at Bunaken (each boat went to a different site so we didn't get too crowded underwater), returning to Murex for lunch around 1PM, and then doing an in-close muck drive around 2:30PM. There was opportunity for a house reef dive in the late afternoon, and then dinner was served at 6:30PM. (And most people were conked out by 9PM.) The other option is to make it a 3-dive day at Bunaken or a 3-dive Manado Bay muck day, and not re-

turn to Murex for lunch but instead have lunch on the boat between dives two and three.

But nature mucked up (pun fully intended) our plans. Although this should be the dry season in Manado, we got rain and sometimes wind, almost every single day. This becomes an issue when you realize that the boats back into the sandy beach (there is no dock or even a breakwater) for gear and divers to be loaded or unloaded, so when the surf picks up, that can become quite hazardous.

On our first dive day, we were able to make the first two dives and return for lunch, but surface conditions got so treacherous that we cancelled the afternoon dive. And in all the years I've been going to Murex, I've never seen it like this, let alone consistently so, day after day.

Now the good news was that the rain was fairly polite and generally didn't hit until late in the afternoon. So in the mornings, we were able to – carefully – load the boats up, do the dives, return for lunch, usually get in an afternoon dive (we even added a night dive on Day 2 to make up for the missed dive on Day 1) and then when we got back to Murex around 4PM, the skies would open up. (One day, there was a **TORRENTIAL** downpour for three hours straight.) So no afternoon house reef dive.

And while everyone was in good spirits about this - ironically the days generally started out sunny, and it was always warm, even when it was raining – the rain really messed up the on-shore muck diving around Manado Bay. Aside from choppy conditions, the water was green from all the runoff and the visibility didn't seem too good (a notion which we tested on our last diving day). So most of our dives were over at Bunaken.

Now that's nothing to sneer at. The diving there is absolutely world-class and the number of turtles we were seeing was simply astounding.

Bunaken, especially the frontside (south side) sites, has always been reliable for turtle sightings but this was like they were having a turtle convention. We saw Greens and Hawksbills, in generally equal numbers, and on one dive we decided to do a turtle census and counted 39 turtles during the hour-long dive. Not too shabby.

Divers always like warm water but in this case, the water may have been TOO warm. In the same way that too-warm water can damage kelp here in California, water that's too warm can affect corals too. Normally, we'd expect the water temps at Bunaken to be around 82°. On my gauge on this trip the temps were 87° with an occasional 88°. There's no immediate telling of what the long-range effect might be, but it's generally considered to be not good. (But I must say, we all loved diving in the bathwater.)

Visibility varied from around 40 feet at the low end to 80 feet or so at the high end with the average probably running around 60 feet. Visibility was also affected by how deep we were as well as whether it was sunny or clouding up.

On our last day, we deliberately chose what we knew would be low-visibility dives by deciding to do two of the Manado Bay on-shore muck sites. The viz lived up – or down – to our expectations and was 20 feet or less

on the first site and maybe 5 feet at the second site, both with a lot of particulate in the water. But because these were muck sites, we were moving slow and looking for small stuff anyhow so the viz wasn't really a hindrance.

And we immediately started off with three Leaf Scorpionfish (including a really nice-looking dark pink one), thousands of Cardinalfish of various species, numerous nudibranches, a couple of different Scorpionfish, and a juvy Yellowtail Coris. And that that was just on the first dive. On the second dive we added different Anemone Shrimp and Anemonefish, a sea snake, a juvy Many-Spotted Sweetlips, a juvy Emperor Angelfish, a number of pipefish, and a Cuttlefish. So the viz didn't hinder us in our critter hunt.

I mentioned both Bangka and Lembah earlier and they deserve special mention.

Bangka Island is about a 2-hour boat ride from Murex in Manado and Murex has another resort there (Murex Bangka). What makes Bangka special are the currents that occur in the area which have helped it gain a reputation as a fabulous place to see as astounding variety of soft corals. Soft corals pump themselves up with water so they require currents to thrive. (When there's no current, they look like deflated balloons.) Sometimes

TENTATIVE 2023 DIVING VACATIONS

March • San Ignacio Lagoon

May • Bonaire

July • Yap

August • Isla Mujeres

the currents are mild and sometimes they are strong. Sometimes quite strong. We hit it on a fairly strong-current day. And that meant paying close attention to where the DMs wanted you to go and understanding that there are ways to duck behind outcroppings and get out of the current, at least momentarily.

We dove Sahaung, a site I'd been to numerous times before and which I think is simply one of the prettiest soft coral reefs I've ever seen. Basrah even managed to start the dive off with a special find: a Pygmy Seahorse.

Pygmy Seahorses are quite a challenge for a photographer. First of all, as the name implies, they're really small: roughly 3/4 inch long, sitting with their stubby tail wrapped tightly around part of the seafan (which makes them look even smaller). Their coloration and bumpiness of their skin is slightly lighter or the same as the sea fans on which they live but their texture is similar so they're hard to spot (or easy to miss – you wonder how often you swam by one and simply didn't see it). In fact, the story is that they were first discovered by seafan researchers who looked at their photos and said, "What's that thing?" When they went back to the seafan, they discovered the Pygmy Seahorse and then started seeing more and more once they knew what they were looking for. (And we now know there are a couple of different species and even different colorations within a species.)

But the Pygmy is a shy camera subject. They almost always will turn away from any source of light so the typical Pygmy shot is of their back. It's quite a challenge to get even a profile shot let alone a head-on angle. And because the seafan is somewhat wide, those of us with large cameras and strobes that are stretched out have an even harder time because we don't want our equipment banging into the seafan, let alone dislodging or hurting the seahorse.

UPCOMING LOCAL DIVES & CLASSES

DAY	DATE	BOAT/SITE	PLANNED DESTINATION	PRICE
Wed.	Nov. 2	--- CLASS ---	--- NAUI Nitrox ---	\$95
Tues.	15	Zoom Seekers	Craig Gelpi - Cat. Marine Soc.	FREE
Thu.	Dec. 1	Redondo (Vets)	••• Squid Dive (night) •••	FREE
Sat.	3	Redondo (Vets)	Mastering Surf Entries & Exits	\$30
Wed.	7	Catalina Express	Avalon U/W Park (3 dives)	\$175
Wed.	21	--- CLASS ---	--- Secrets of Fish ID ---	\$30

2023 SKED COMING SOON

So I was quite pleased, on another dive, to be able to spend some time with one subject and actually get a profile shot of him. You'll find that, as well as a not-too-great shot of a yellow one, in the SmugMug slideshow.

The Lembeh Strait is a story all unto itself. A lot of people come to North Sulawesi to only dive this short stretch of water – 10 miles long and less than 1 mile wide - because it contains probably the highest concentration of unusual critters that you could ever hope to find in one place. It's been referred to as "The Mecca of Macro." This is due to the nature of the bottom there which is generally a dark sand. But crawling across this bottom are various species of octopuses, Scorpionfish, cuttlefish, Cockatoo Waspfish, puffers, Mandarinfish, and more. And there's a species of Cardinalfish – the Banggai Cardinalfish – that are ONLY found around Banggai Island and in the Lembeh Straits.

We did three Lembeh dives with a lunch break at the Lembeh Resort (which is simply drop-dead gorgeous). Murex doesn't own the resort itself but runs the dive and photo operations so there's an on-going relationship between them. In fact, one of the packages Murex offers is called "Passport to Paradise," which is three days at Murex Manado, three days at Murex Bangka, and three days at Lembeh Resort. Personally, I'm not a fan of packing up every three days and changing resorts so, even though our way of doing things is a bit more time-consuming overall, I like keep-

ing Murex Manado as our home base. As Murex owner Danny Charlton has told me on many occasions, "I know you're a Murex Manado guy Ken." And maybe even a bit more so now because of some improvements they've made.

One "advantage" of the pandemic is that Danny and wife Angelique took the downtime to do upgrades on both the Manado and Bangka properties. In Manado, they refurbished almost all of the rooms, installed universal electrical plugs in many areas of the resorts (but be aware it's still 220-240 volts, which is still fine for most American-made products), they rebuilt the main dining area which not only served as a social hub (and where we got the best free Wi-Fi signal) but it was a welcome refuge during the daily downpours.

Speaking of rain – and Murex IS in the tropics – another nice touch is that each room has two umbrellas assigned to it as well as there are other umbrellas available around the resort. In fact, one day when we returned from a dive and it was raining, the staff greeted us at the beach landing site and passed out umbrellas to everyone. So they really do go the extra mile to ensure that you have the best possible trip you can, no matter what the weather and water conditions are.

They're also going to insure that you get fed well. They've changed the way they do meals. In the past, everything was served buffet-style. Now, it's a combination of buffet some days and order-from-a-menu on other days. The new chef, Mo, does a great job

not only with the cooking, but also with the presentation on the made-to-order dishes. And even with the 18 of us plus a few others guests all sitting down at roughly the same time, no one seemed to have to wait long for food – you generally started with an appetizer, then the main course, then dessert – and you heard a lot of “You need to taste this” going around. So toque’s off to Chef Mo for a job well done.

In fact – and I admit that I’m likely a bit biased here – everything Murex does, whether it’s in Manado, Bangka, or Lembah, is done with the satisfaction of the guests in mind. There are certainly things out of their control but the level of service and attention to detail is something they stay on top of. And under the watchful eyes of Danny & Angelique, as well as resort manager Pim van Schendel and dive supervisor Basrah Tan, you will have

an enjoyable stay.

As we come out of the COVID era and the word opens up again to travel and diving, there are a couple of places that were/are high on my list to support again, not only because the diving’s good, but because the relationships we’ve established over the years with these people are also important. So we want to help them get back on their post-COVID feet as quickly as possible. I’m not sure exactly when we’ll be back at Murex Manado again, but I assure you we WILL be back and we WILL have a good time and you WILL want to make sure that this time, you’re part of the group.

POST-SCRIPT: I wrote this trip report on the non-stop 15-hour flight from Singapore to LAX and didn’t think too much about the fact that I was getting a runny nose. By the time we landed it was a little worse and by the time I got home,

I had a feeling of dread. Sure enough, I did a COVID home antigen test the next morning and tested positive. Five others in our group of 18 have also tested positive.

So this is just a reminder that even though we’re in a post-COVID world, COVID itself hasn’t gone away. Everyone on this trip was fully vaccinated and everyone tested negative before we flew there. We all wore masks in the airports and on the planes in both directions. All of our meals were in open-air places and the boats are relatively open-air as well. These are all things that should help prevent the spread of the disease. And yet 1/3 of our group now is sick with COVID.

I don’t think anyone in our group or at the resort did anything wrong. But it’s a very real reminder that COVID is still out there lurking and sometimes even the best defenses will not be 100% effective. The good news, and I attribute this to the vaccines, is that it seems all of our cases are mild and should resolve shortly. But traveler beware: It ain’t over.

PICTURE PAGE - Indonesia 2022

(All pix by Ken Kurtis © 2022)



**Blue-Girdled
Angelfish**



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**Leaf
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