

Hidden Halmahera

by Anita Verde

Enviously located between Raja Ampat and the Lembah Strait lies a challenging diving destination that's surprisingly still off the radar, even for the most adventurous divers.

We divers are an opinionated lot, and although we don't often agree, there's generally a consensus amongst us that the Asia Pacific region takes first prize when it comes to top notch diving. So when we were deciding where to spend our Christmas and New Year break, we thought where could be better than somewhere half way between Raja Ampat and the Lembah Strait?

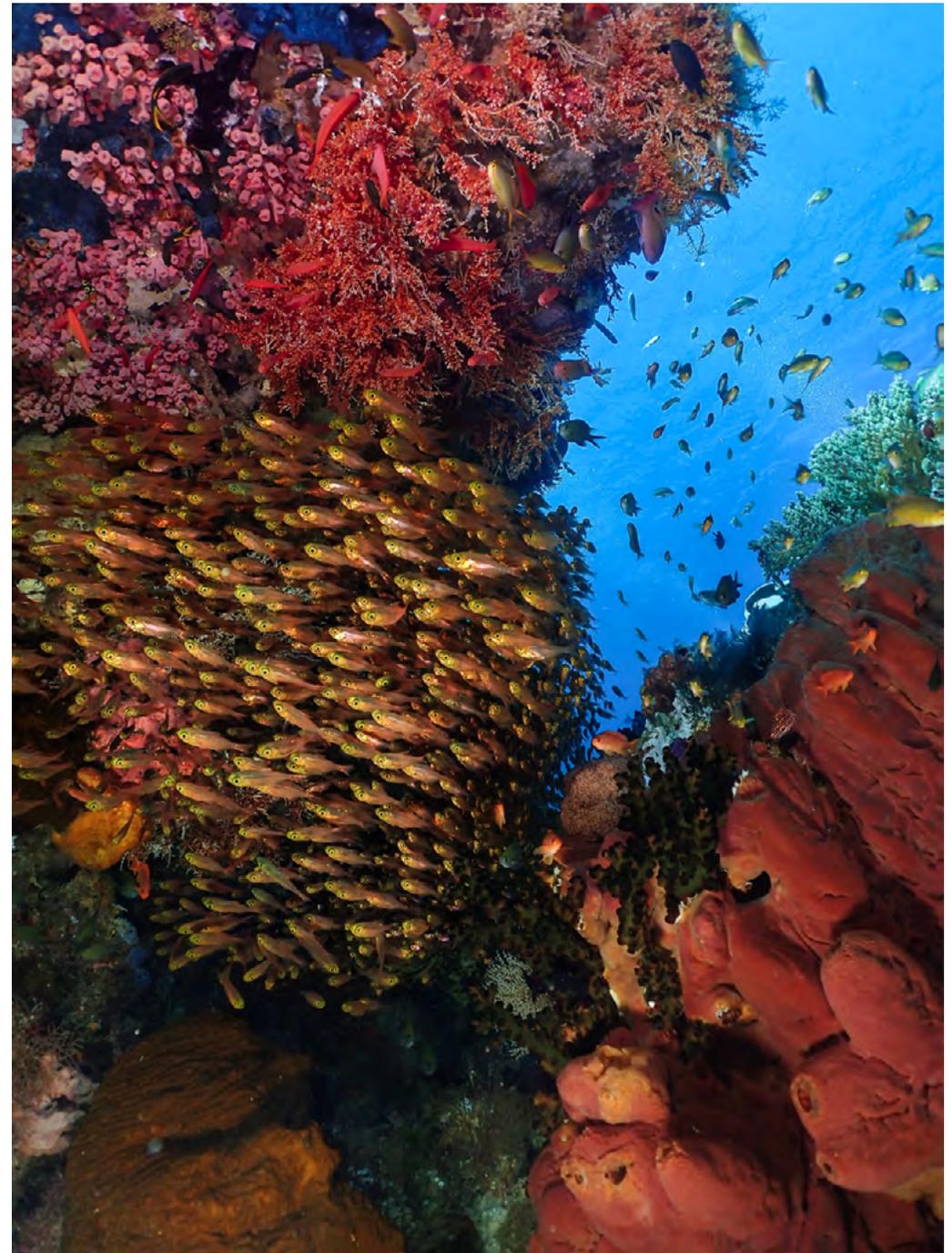
Ok, see if you can guess. Lush volcanic peaks framed by swaying coconut palms, coarse sandy beaches extending to submerged coral gardens, and a mysterious atmosphere like no where else. Where you mistake the sound of a flock of Hornbills for that of a helicopter, and you'd almost swear the water was Gin, it's that clear. We're talking about Sali Kecil, a tiny island located in the Strait of Bacan. Ok, be honest, you've probably never heard of it, and even if you have you've only got a vague idea of where it is.

We bump our way along a

meandering jungle road from Bacan's Labhua Airport down to the waters edge, it's prayer time and the call from the local mosque fills the warm humid air. Tired and with the evening upon us, we board a boat for our final leg to the only dive resort in the area - Sali Bay Resort on Sali Kecil. As evening falls the sky and sea are awash with diamonds as the starry night sky and bioluminescence rewards us for the long journey we've endured.

Located in the rarely visited waters of the southern reaches of the Indonesian island of Halmahera, and enviously located between the Lembah Strait and Raja Ampat, the waters around this sparsely populated island are amongst the most impressive of all marine biodiversity hot spots. The waters here are uncharted, and despite its location amidst the richest seas on earth, the almost non existence of resorts and liveaboards in the area means it has remarkably remained off the radar, even for the most adventurous divers.

With the sea full of promise we are fuelled with anticipation as to what the diving here will bring. Upon submersion, we find ourselves amidst pristine coral gardens, complete





with the unpredictable currents that characterise the region.

The islands of Sali Kecil (the small one) where the resort is located, and Sali Besar (the big one) are smack bang in the middle of the strait between Bacan and the main island of Halmahera. This location means that careful planning and selection of dive sites is required for safe diving. If you get it wrong, it's all 'washing machines' and 'mission impossible' photography.

But the currents also mean the corals here are colossal. On each dive, we are dwarfed by gigantic

gorgonians, elephant ear and barrel sponges, table corals and large gardens of cabbage coral. Delicate soft corals in a fury of pink and orange also star on every dive, providing a safe haven for numerous species of juvenile fish.

The resort's remote location means total exclusivity to 60 known dive sites, and given much of the area is yet to be explored there is also the opportunity to add to this list with additional exploratory diving. We managed to visit 25 sites during our stay, all of which were uniquely breathtaking. It would take a lifetime

to discover all of the dive sites in the area, a challenge we hope to undertake.

Whether you're exploring the area's many sloping reefs, drop-offs or delicate coral gardens, wandering in the blue or getting down in the muck, you'll find healthy populations of reef sharks, turtles, batfish, rays, bumphead parrotfish, napoleon wrasse (one was the size of a Fiat 500!), and more strange critters than you can begin to identify, many of which are new discoveries to the resort owners, and absent from marine life identification books. On one dive we

came across what appeared to be a tiny white dragonet not much bigger than a pea!

Given its envious location, it's not surprising that the biodiversity of marine life here is outstanding, yet its remoteness combined with a lack of marine survey data means the region is literally a 'black box', with very little understood. The only significant indicator of the region's potential are the impressive results from a survey undertaken in 2005 in the south-western part of Halmahera, where renowned ichthyologist and marine zoologist Dr Gerald Allen recorded



a total of 803 species of reef fish over 37 hours underwater at 28 locations. This is impressive given he recorded 828 species in Raja Ampat during a similar survey conducted over 60 hours in 2001. So maybe it's not difficult to suggest that the region's biodiversity could be comparable to that of Raja Ampat.

You'll see almost every species of pygmy seahorse here, they star on every dive, and in 2013 a new species of walking shark was also discovered, *Hemiscyllium Halmahera*. Also known as the bamboo shark or long tail carpet shark, these sharks prefer to walk rather than swim by wriggling their

bodies and pushing with their pectoral and pelvic fins. Relatively small, the species here is believed to reach a maximum of 70 cm in length. Seeing this shy creature is easy as it's made a home in the shallow waters just off the resort's jetty. A dive in the late evening will give you the best chance for an encounter. We were lucky to see one during a night dive on the resort's stunning house reef. Shy but curiously it peaked out at us from under a coral boulder before slowly shuffling backwards into the darkness. While we managed to get a quick photograph, no photograph could ever hope to capture the intimacy of the encounter.

All of this, alongside the chance of seeing of dolphins and numerous species of whale makes the region a very enticing dive destination. During a surface interval, we were lucky to encounter a pod of 20 pilot whales, including a calf who leisurely sojourned at the surface. Not in the slightest concerned about our presence, we marvelled at their majesty for almost 20 minutes before they finally slipped into the deep. The topside scenery didn't disappoint either, with lush volcanic peaks and

dense jungle vegetation, free from deforestation and inhabited by numerous species of bird and monkey.

The owners of the resort, a consortium from Italy and Switzerland are committed to protecting the marine environment and are currently working with the Indonesian government to protect the region's unique biodiversity through the ambitious establishment of a marine park. To date, talks have been lengthy and are ongoing, but something tells me their passion for the region will help them succeed.

Want to dive here? Sali Bay Resort is located on the island of Sali Kecil in a protected bay in the Southern reaches of the island of Halmahera (North Maluku) Indonesia.

The resort caters to guests in twelve beach front deluxe villa accommodations nestled delicately on the shoreline with direct access to the sea. Larger groups can also book the Diver's Lodge, located at the end of the bay and consisting of four rooms with private bathrooms and a wide veranda facing the sea.

Custom built dive boats and experienced



guides take divers on challenging exploratory dive trips in the remote Halmahera sea, and underwater photographers are well catered for with a dedicated camera room and facilities. Twelve litre aluminium tanks with DIN and INT valves are provided and Nitrox is available.

The resort is also a paradise for snorkelers, and has the most beautifully intact and healthy house reef we've seen. A fresh water pool, intimate spa and fabulous food tops off the experience. Italian, German, English, Indonesian and French are fluently spoken.

Although the official wet season is considered to be November to March, Sali Kecil is protected by the islands of Ambon, Halmahera and Bacan, and therefore receives very

little rain. We visited in January and experienced clear sunny skies and calm seas.

Halmahera is not an easy travel destination, and a visit to these uncharted waters should be considered not only an adventure but a privilege.

Sali Bay Resort is a 20 minute overland trip followed by a 50 minute boat ride from Pulau Bacan's Labhua airport. Labhua airport is serviced daily from North Sulawesi's capital Manado with a stop over in Ternate. Singapore Airlines' subsidiary Silk Air runs flights from Singapore to Manado four times per week.

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www.summitstoseas.com

www.salibayresort.com