

# Bali's East Coast



Text and photos by Donald Silcock

**When India's Prime Minister Pandit Nehru visited Bali in 1950 to attend celebrations marking the newly established independence of Indonesia, he famously called the island "the morning of the world". His simple but eloquent description really does encapsulate the uniqueness of this special island.**

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Predominantly Hindu in a nation of over 220 million people, where Islam is the principal religion, Bali is the only place outside of the Indian sub-continent where the Hindu religion exists in any real strength.

Introduced in the 6th century, by Hindu traders from India, the religion spread rapidly across this huge

archipelago of over 17,000 islands, peaking in the 14th century with the Majapahit Empire. The rise of Islam from the 14th century slowly but surely eclipsed the Hindu kingdoms, and Hinduism itself, and ultimately forced what was left of the Hindu elite to take refuge, consolidating in Bali around the end of the 15th century.

Their descendants have succeeded in protecting their heritage, and it's this strong culture that makes the island so special.

## Tourism in Bali

Simply stated, tourism is the life-blood of Bali. Its unique culture, special ambience and physical features have

drawn visitors to the island since the 1960s. The Balinese are generally very tolerant of tourists and their mores and almost always manage to maintain their smiles and composure. It's their strong culture and tight village lifestyle that provides this foundation.

It's not just the money that tourism brings to the island that the Balinese





like; they are genuinely open and friendly to foreigners as any study of their history shows.

Tourism can be roughly divided into three groups. There are the mass-market visitors for whom the southeast corner of the island caters. The so-called "tourist triangle" of Kuta, Nusa Dua and Sanur caters for every variation possible from the low end budget accommodation in Losmens, to

the very top end of town and everything in between.

Beaches, restaurants, bars and nightlife provide everything that these visitors want from their vacations, which typically last about seven days.

The second group are those coming in search of the 'real Bali'. The exact location of this mysterious place is not really clear, apart from it not being anywhere

near the tourist triangle. However, the most likely location is the town of Ubud up in the hills north of Denpasar, although there is a counter argument that it's really in Seminyak at

the western edge of the tourist triangle.

Ubud is certainly a charming place that combines the best of both worlds—so charming that my wife and I have actually bought a place there!

The third group is those visitors who come to sample what the seas surrounding Bali have to offer. By far, surfers dominate this group, and Kuta, the epicenter of

the tourist triangle, became what it is because of the quality of the breaks just off the beach there.

Second to the surfers are us divers who are attracted to the island because, unlike many other locations in Indonesia, it offers a great combination of diving and things to do and see when we are not underwater. Also Bali, along with Jakarta, is a "hub" that caters for international flights and allows the onward dive traveler to get to places like Manado and Sorong.

Many divers choose to break their long international journeys and sample the delights of Bali for a few days.

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**Diving Bali**

Bali's most famous dive site is the *Liberty* shipwreck just off the beach at the small town of Tulamben on the northeast coast of the island. A close second is probably the muck diving Mecca of Seraya, just a few kilometers east of Tulamben.

The *Liberty* wreck is without doubt a great dive, but to enjoy it, you need to be there early or late in the day, because in between, it gets very crowded as the day-trippers arrive.

The physical distance from the southeast corner to Tulamben is about 80km, but the journey takes between three to four hours on Bali's narrow and crowded roads. Most divers either base themselves in the southeast and do day trips or stay up on the northeast coast and forego the restaurants and bars. Either way, they will pass through the town of Candi Dasa on the east coast.

Often referred to as the eastern frontier of tourism in Bali, Candi Dasa is a pleasant town located at the northern end of Amuk Bay and hosts a good selection of hotels, restaurants and cafes. It is also a great place from which to base yourself in order to explore the east coast of the island.

**The East Coast**

There are two things you really need to know about diving on the east coast—first, the area is subject to some of the strongest currents you are ever likely to experience, and secondly, the water can be really cool, so a 5mm wetsuit is highly recommended. The strong currents are the result of the Indonesian Throughflow (see sidebar below) and the water temperatures are produced by the cold-water upwellings from the deep trenches to the north and south of Bali. This is a powerful combination, which acts as the catalyst for some really great diving, but a good guide with local knowledge and experience is essential if you want to experience the sites safely.



**10,000 RIVERS**

What makes the East Coast of Bali, and in fact many of the other great locations in this vast archipelago such good diving, is Sverdrups and the Indonesian Throughflow.

If, like me, you had never heard of Sverdrups before, I suggest you buy a copy of David Pickell and Wally Siagian's excellent book *Diving Bali* (ISBN 962-593-323-9). It's the best reference I have found to diving in Bali, and you will find that its contents and maps are used by virtually all the dive guides on the island.

But it's David Pickell's excellent description of the immense hydraulic forces that prevail in the Lombok Channel, which separates Bali and its eastern neighbor of Lombok, that sold me on the book. Understanding these

forces enables an understanding of why the East Coast can be such good, but potentially challenging, diving.

Let me give you the Readers Digest version: To the northwest of the Indonesian archipelago lies the Pacific Ocean where the sea level is 150 mm (6 ins) above average; whilst to the south lies the Indian Ocean where the sea level is 150mm below average.

This disparity is caused by the trade winds and associated currents that act in opposite directions in the northern and southern hemispheres, but the overall result is a massive flow of water from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean. So huge is the volume that traditional measurements such as cubic meters and gallons are inadequate to describe it in an easily understandable way. So

the Norwegian scientist Harald Sverdrup invented the Sverdrup—one million cubic meters of water per second.

David Pickell visualizes like this—think of a river 100m wide, 10m deep and flowing at 4 knots. Then imagine 500 similar rivers—that's one Sverdrup!

It is estimated that the total amount of seawater that passes through the Indonesian Throughflow is 20-22 Sverdrups, or 10,000 of those rivers. A massive volume of water that has to make its way around the chain of islands, which runs along the bottom part of the Indonesian archipelago called the Lesser Sundas that stretch from Bali in the west to Timor in the east.

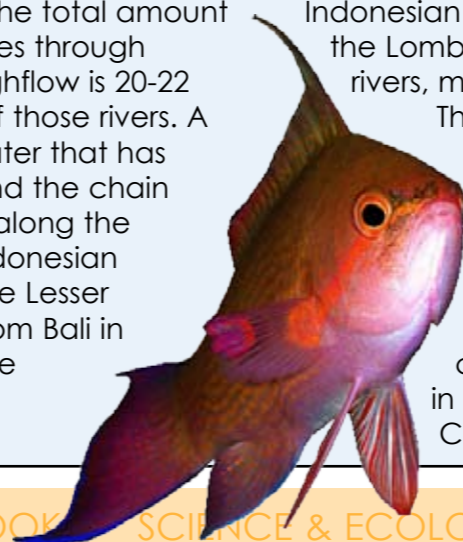
There are a limited

number of channels between the islands of the Lesser Sundas, and of these, the 35km wide Lombok Strait, between Bali and its neighboring island Lombok, offers the most direct path to the Indian Ocean. It is estimated that about 20 percent of the shallow water flow of the Indonesian Throughflow passes through the Lombok Strait, which in terms of rivers, means 1500 of them.

That's a lot of water, but what's so important is that it carries with it the eggs and larvae of the marine life of the Indo-Pacific, an incredibly diverse area with over 4000 identified species—compared to around 1000 in the Red Sea and 400 in the Caribbean. This helps to explain

the intense biodiversity of some of Bali's reefs and dive sites. But the other piece of the puzzle is the seasonal upwellings from the deep waters around the island.

The Indonesian archipelago's underwater topography is incredibly complex with deep trenches, troughs and basins surrounding its 18,000 islands. Around the Lesser Sundas, it is particularly complex, with the very deep Flores and Banda basins to the north and the Bali and Sunda trenches to the south. As the Indonesian Throughflow weaves its way over and through this complex underwater landscape, it creates upwellings that carry streams of nutrient rich cold water from the deep, which nourish the reefs of eastern Bali and other hot spots on the island. ■





**Amuk Bay**

Amuk Bay itself is roughly 8km wide, with Candi Dasa at the northern end and Padangbai just round the southern tip of the bay. Padangbai is a small but very pleasant and picturesque fishing village, best known as the place to catch the ferry to Lombok and where most of the dive operators working the east coast depart from.

The three main dive areas—The Blue Lagoon, Mimpang and Gili Tepekong—offer considerable diversity, and each

one has its own unique features.

**The Blue Lagoon** is the location that less experienced divers are usually taken to first, as the dive sites in this area are generally much less exposed to the strong currents experienced at the other sites. However, don't let this fool you into thinking that this is a second rate area,

it's not, and of the six dives I experienced here, I was impressed with the health of the bommies and the general marine life.

More of a macro than a wide angle area, I saw a great selection of frogfish, leaf scorpion fish, moray eels, scorpion and stone fish, blue spotted stingrays and lots of nudibranchs.

The name Blue Lagoon conjures up images of deserted Pacific Ocean islands with swaying palm trees, however it's actually a small bay located just around the headland and to the northeast of

Padangbai Bay. There is a small resort located right on the beach, which is popular with tourists from Candi Dasa who go there to snorkel.

The more correct name for the area is Tanjung Sari, and there are a number of sites to dive, not just the bay in front of the resort. The relative lack of currents and maximum depths of around 15-18m offer a pleasant combination of an uncomplicated dive site, with plenty to see.

**Gili Mimpang** is one of three islands located just outside Amuk Bay as the seafloor starts to drop down into the depths of the Lombok Strait, which means that all three spots are subject to the strong currents associated with the Throughflow. None of them are suitable for newly qualified divers, and again, a good guide is essential for even the most experienced diver.

The other two islands are Gili Tepekong and Gili Biaha, with Tepekong about one kilometer south-east of Mimpang and Biaha about 4km northeast.

Gili Mimpang is actually a group of small islands, three of which break the surface and are known as Batu Tiga. Local legend has it that they were used for target practice by the Indonesian

air force in the 1960's—thus possibly explaining why they are so broken up compared to the very solid lumps of rock that make up Tepekong and Biaha. Mimpang's position is closer towards Amuk Bay, which means that it is less exposed to the currents of the Lombok Strait, and therefore, is often considered to be a lesser site than the other two.

My experience from two days of diving both Mimpang and the nearby Tepekong is that it has a great deal to offer, particularly the southern edge of the site where there are some excellent small caves teeming with fish life and very healthy soft coral that are surrounded by very photogenic glass fish.

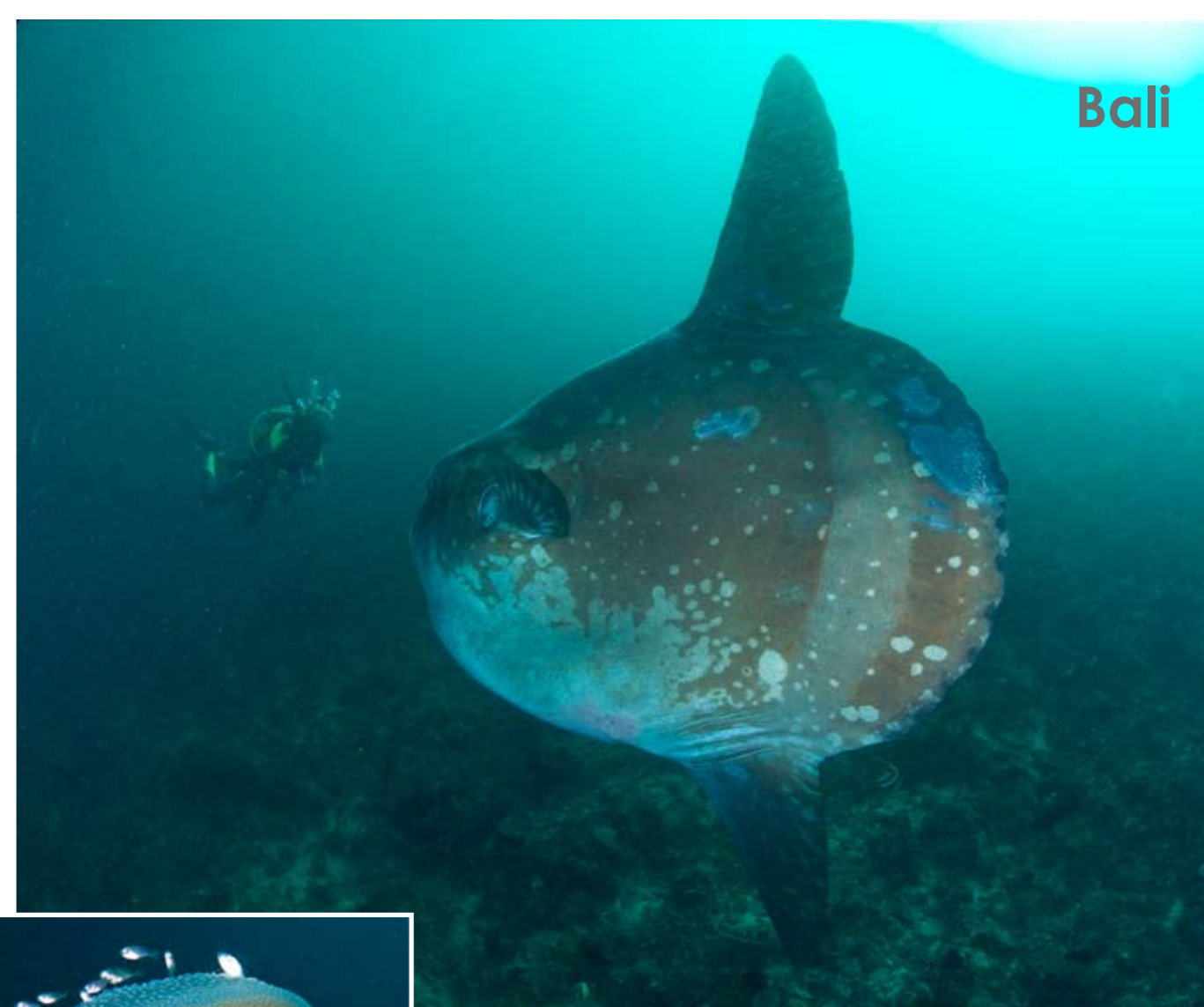
I was amply rewarded for visiting Mimpang when,

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on the first dive of the second day, my very excited dive guide, Mitra, basically dragged me away from the caves giving me a very strange hand sign that I subsequently learned is the local code for the Mola Mola, or Oceanic Sun Fish, that this area of Bali is well known for at certain times of the year.

I have long wanted to photograph the Mola Mola, but was not expecting to be so fortunate as it was late December, and September is known as the time to





Bali



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take photographs—no award winning shots that day!

**Gili Tepekong** is only one kilometer from Mimpang, but the conditions can vary considerably between the two sites, and often when one can be

dived in safety, the other is out of the question.

Located as it is, right on the edge of the Lombok Strait, Gili Tepekong is swept by the Indonesian Throughflow, which means that when it is safe to dive the site, it is spectacular. But if you try to dive the site in the wrong conditions, you may experience the so-called

toilet effect where instead of going up to the surface as nature intended, your bubbles are spiraling in the opposite direction—caught in one of the infamous down-currents that make the East Coast so potentially challenging.

Definitely a site only for experienced divers, Tepekong rewards those who do venture there with some spectacular diving. The highlight of which is the Canyon at the south-western tip of the site where fallen rocks from the island have created an area reminiscent of Roman ruins, which is now populated by large schools of sweetlips, jacks, groupers and white tip reef sharks.

The Canyon has apparently

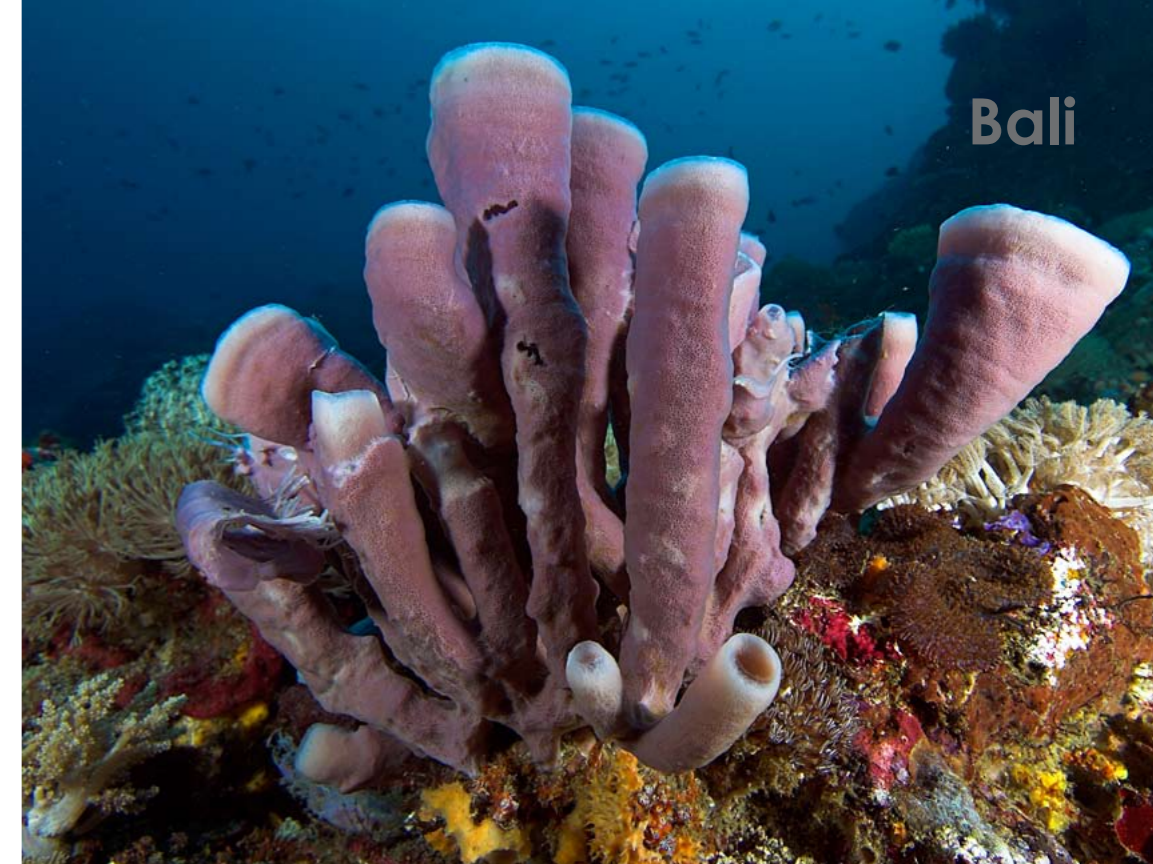
see them. Not only did one grace us with its amazing presence that day, but I was actually able to photograph it as I had made the decision to use a fish-eye lens after being shown the cave area on the previous day.

They really are a unique creature, almost 3m from tip to tip they appear quite ungainly at first glance but can move very quickly, as I learned when I tried to get “the shot”. A true pelagic about which very little is known, they are believed to come to this area of Bali to be cleaned of parasites—usually by the common banner fish, which was indeed the case with the one we saw that day.

The southern edge and the

western side of Mimpang are one of the best places in Bali to see white tip reef sharks, and on my second day, I saw a group of about ten large ones swimming in the strong current. Like most sharks they are wary of divers, particularly ones emitting large streams of bubbles as they struggle against the current to get in position to





established a reputation as a "must-dive" location but many operators are very reluctant to take divers there because of the dangers of the downdraft. Patience and trust in your dive guide are a must, because if they tell you that the conditions are not suitable, you need to accept their judgment, as they can read the situation better than you can.

Such was the story on the days I was diving Tepekong, and my guide, Mitra, knew how much I wanted to dive the Canyon, but cautioned me against it, which is basically what you are paying for—good advice!

At the northern tip of Tepekong



there is a site known as the "Faux Canyon", as apparently some operators have been known to take divers there and tell them it is the real Canyon! I dived this site a few times and enjoyed it, particularly the shark nursery—a wide but low and tapering cave that is host to a substantial number of white tip sharks. It's called the nursery because of the baby white tips that are always found there. In fact, the first couple of times I visited, that was

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all I found—four to five one-metre-long juveniles. However, on the last dive, it must have been lunchtime, as mum and dad were home as well, and although initially quite camera shy, they started to come closer and closer. Quite an exciting sensation when you find yourself jammed into the cave due to the strong surge!

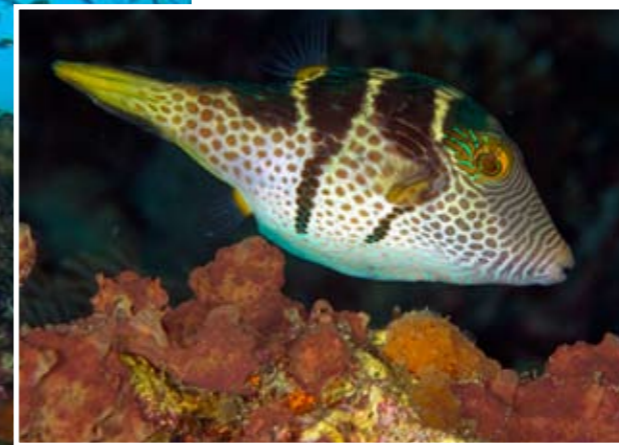
**Nusa Penida**  
**—Sental, Ped, SD and Toyapakeh**

Nusa Penida, together with Nusa Lembongan and Nusa Ceningan, is a group of three islands that sit right in the middle of the Lombok Strait between Bali and Lombok. This position means that their northern coasts bear the full brunt of the Indonesian Throughflow as it hits the islands.

The western and eastern coasts experience very strong currents due to the huge volumes of water sweeping past.

Nusa Penida is by far the largest of the three islands—roughly 18 km long and 14 km wide, compared to the combined size of Lembongan and Ceningan at just 3 by 5 km. Separated from Lembongan and Ceningan by the Toyapakeh Strait, Penida is a low, dry limestone island, which means that it does not have





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the wet season heavy river run-offs that significantly reduce the underwater visibility.

I had read stories of the excellent visibility and healthy reefs on the northern and northwest coasts of Nusa Penida, but had also heard others about coral bleaching as a

result of El Nino in 1998. So, I guess my expectations were fairly low. However, on my first few dives there, I was frankly quite stunned by the 25m plus visibility, excellent fish life and overall vibrancy of the reefs.

The water temperature at all the sites on the north coast—Sental, Ped and SD, and Toyapakeh on the northwest coast—can be really quite cold. My computer registered 22°C on one dive! But the strong currents and nutrient-rich, cold-water upwellings combine to create some tremendously rewarding diving.

I had also read that many of the Nusa Penida sites were not particularly

good for underwater photography, as the strong currents basically turn every dive into a high-speed drift. However, I actually got some of my best images of the trip on these sites by keeping close to the reef and looking for spots where I could shelter from the current.

The north and northeast coasts of Nusa Penida are also known as locations to see the Mola Mola, and to my surprise and delight, on the fourth day of diving in the area, I saw another one. This time, I spotted it myself when something caught my eye down in the blue. I was at about 15m at the time, and what I saw was a cloud of banner fish surrounding a large but

non-descript lump of something. The lump was the Mola Mola looking up the reef slope, as it was cleaned of the many parasites that live on its body, and when it turned slightly, my nitrogen saturated brain finally registered what it was.

This time, I did not have the fisheye lens, but it did not really matter as the Mola Mola only allowed me to get close enough for one shot before demonstrating its strange but very effective swimming technique and disappeared rapidly into the depths.

**Conclusion**

As a general rule, I much prefer liveaboard diving to land-based. My day job pays for my dive travel and cameras and, like most people, I get a limited number of days vacation every year. Liveaboards allow me to get the maximum diving in the shortest time,





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whereas land-based diving usually restricts you to three dives a day, and too much time is spent getting to the sites.

Having said that, what I really liked about diving the East Coast on this trip were the logistics. I based myself in Candi Dasa and was picked up every morning about 08.30 for the 15-minute drive to Padangbai, where I was able to enjoy a Bali coffee at the Topi Inn ([www.topiinn.com](http://www.topiinn.com)) whilst the dive boat was loaded with the gear for the day's diving.

We were usually on our way by about 09.15, and the maximum time to any of the sites was 40 minutes, but usually much less. The morning's two dives were done before noon, and then it was time for a nice lunch ordered the day before

from the Topi Inn, followed by a quick snooze.

The afternoon dive was usually completed by three, and then it was back to Padangbai for a quick fresh water shower and another coffee before heading back to the hotel in time for a sundowner of ice cold Bintang whilst reviewing the days images—very civilized!

*My visit to the East Coast of Bali was organized through AquaMarine Diving ([www.aquamarinediving.com](http://www.aquamarinediving.com)) and I would like to thank Annabel Thomas and her staff for a first class trip, which was superbly organized and very professionally conducted.*

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**BALI**  
 The Island really is a special place, each time I visit Bali the more enjoyable I find the experience. The Balinese people are predominantly Hindu in a nation dominated by Islam, and have a long history & a unique culture that draws visitors from far and wide.

**Safety** Bali has been the subject of two horrendous bombings and both of them occurred in the "tourist triangle" in the southeast of the island, a long way from the dive locations on the east, northeast & northwest of the island. My opinion is that I am perfectly safe away from the principle tourist areas, which I tend to avoid anyway.

**When To Go** The dry season of April to October is the best time to dive the east coast and May to September have the optimum conditions & visibility. My trip was actually in December, right in the middle of the rainy season, so the heavy river run-offs from the often-torrential afternoon rain in Bali meant that the underwater visibility was not particularly good – especially at the sites closest to shore. However, overall I was most impressed by the diversity of this part of Bali and was pleased with the images I took.

**Who To Dive With** There are many dive operators in Bali offering a range of diving and services but I have personally found AquaMarine Diving ([www.aquamarinediving.com](http://www.aquamarinediving.com)) to be very professional and highly organized and would thoroughly recommend them.

**Getting There** Bali's airport is located in the southeast of the island, very close to the main tourist areas. It is a major hub in Indonesia and very well serviced by international and domestic carriers.

**Where To Stay** I personally stayed at the Water Garden Hotel in Candi Dasa [www.watergardenhotel.com](http://www.watergardenhotel.com), which was suggested & arranged by AquaMarine Diving. There is a wide variety of hotels to suit all tastes and budgets in Candi Dasa.