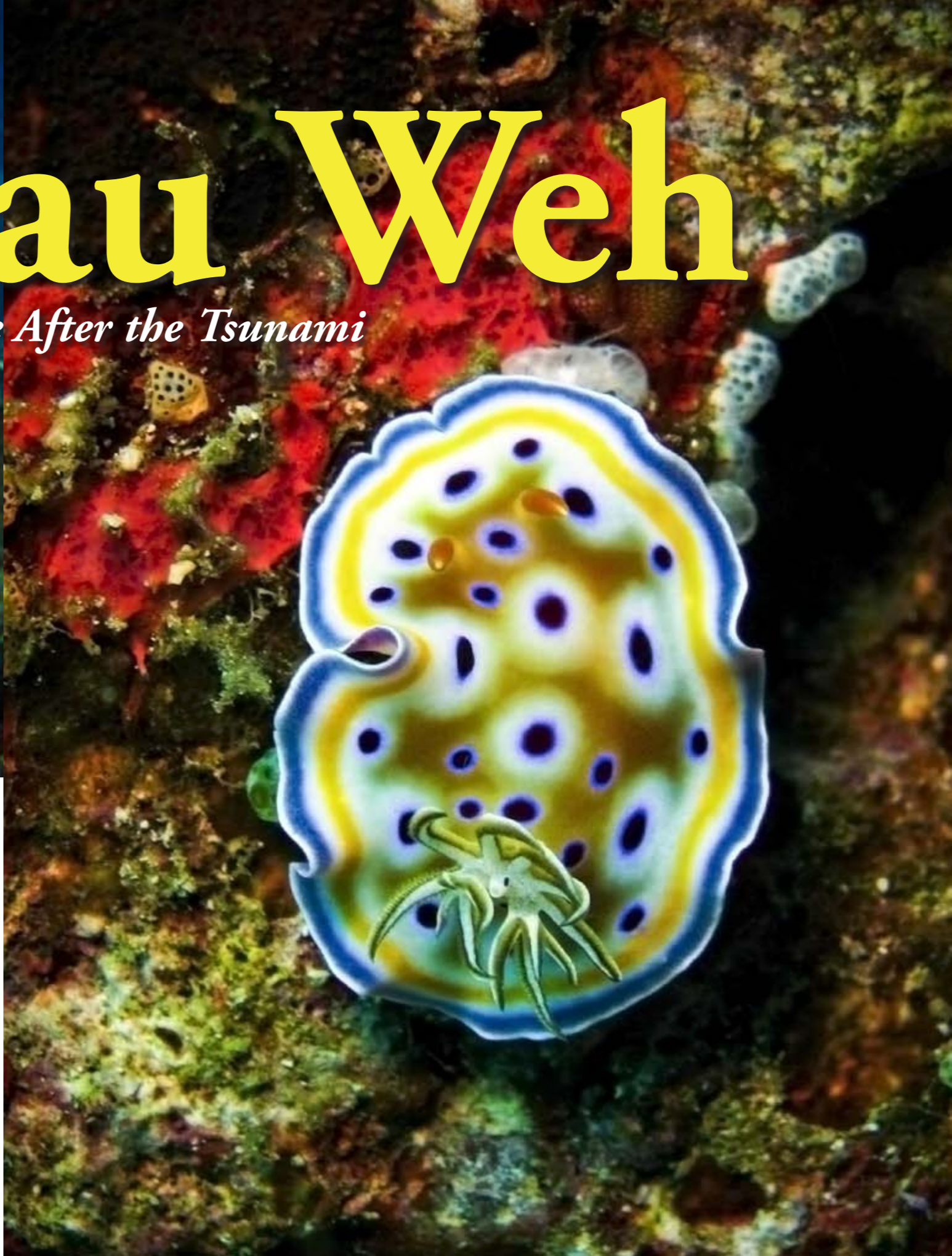


Pulau Weh

Rebirth of Paradise After the Tsunami



On a beautiful day just like any other, divers in the water were enjoying the underwater scenery and rich marine life around Pulau Weh in Aceh, Indonesia. All of a sudden, they heard a loud and painful noise forcing all of them to cover their ears. Many thought it was a tanker passing overhead, but the sight of all the moray eels swimming out of their holes must have been something totally unimaginable and bewildering.

Text by Simon Kong
Photos by Asther Lau

The divers then surfaced and headed back to the dive shop, not knowing what to make of the strange phenomenon until they started seeing brand new bungalows floating on the sea.

Back at Gapang Beach, almost all the wooden houses and restaurants had disappeared, and Lumba Lumba Diving Centre had its front façade smashed away. The divers had to wait two hours until the surge was safe enough to land the boat. It was the day of the 2004 Tsunami.

Fortunately and miraculously, the tsunami that hit Aceh on December 26, claimed very few lives on Pulau Weh located only

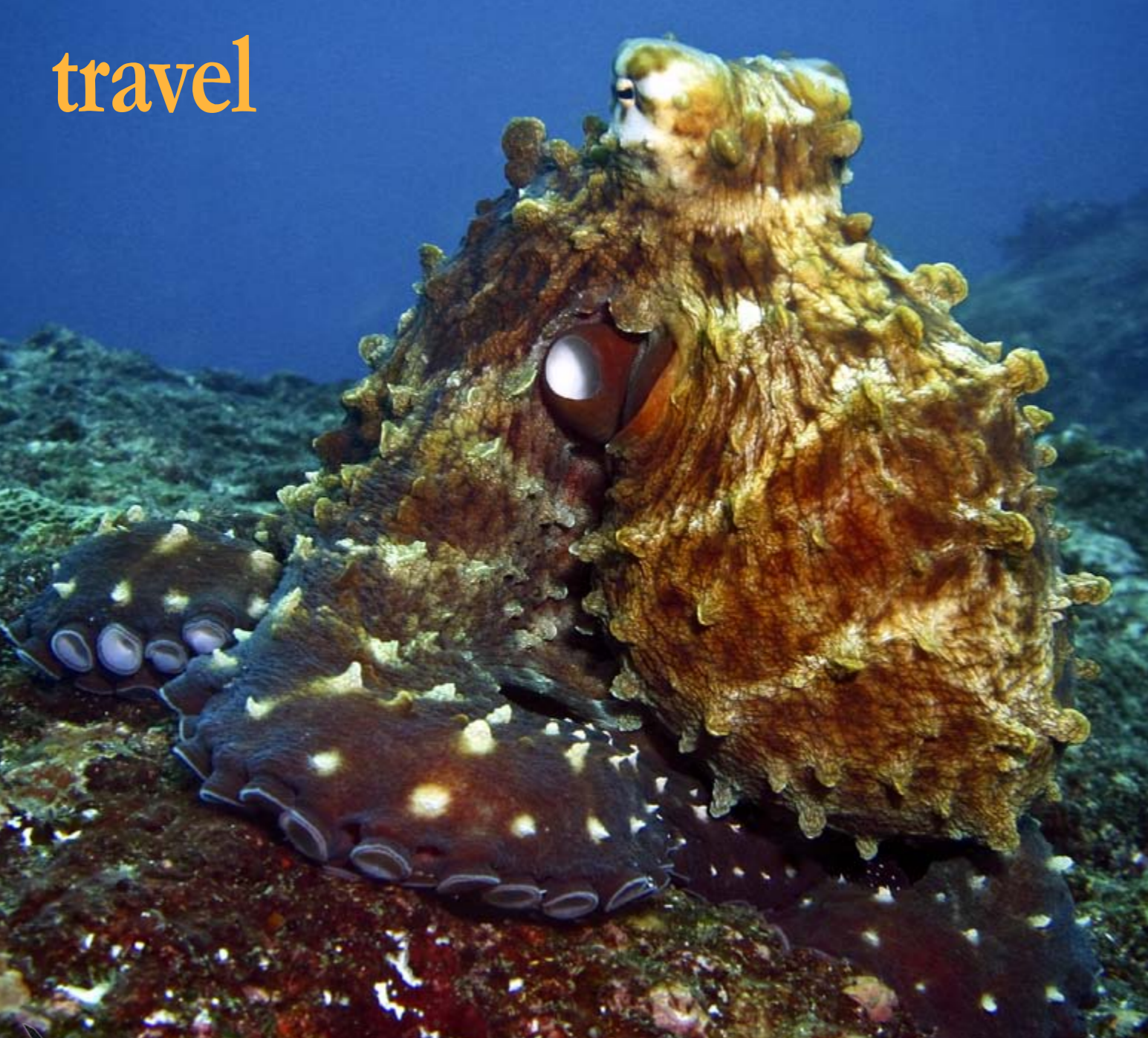
one hour north of Banda Aceh. The owners of the dive center, Ton and Marjan Egbers, survived by standing atop the dive gear rinsing shed and a tree located just beside the shop.

Most of the destructive power of the tsunami was the strong pulling power of the receding wave, where everything was swept out to sea including fins and masks prompting the owners to later joke that they were the dive shop with the mismatched fins.

Today, there are hardly any signs that this terrible tragedy

TOP: Freckled hawkfish are a common sight. RIGHT: Nudibranchs are rare in Pulau Weh





Octopus; Flat worm crawling along bottom; Red spotted coral crab

of meeting mantas, whale sharks and mola molas plus the ultra slim chance of seeing a megamouth shark. This island was the site of one adult sighting and one discovery of a dead juvenile mega-mouth shark right on the beach in front of Lumba Lumba Diving Centre! With any luck, I could very well be the next guy to brag about a sighting.

At the Ulee Lheue ferry terminal, it is easy to see why the tsunami had such a devastating effect; the terrain is flat making it very easy for the tsunami to flow right through. You can also see the black domes of the Grand Mosque in Banda Aceh where in pre-tsunami times, the view was totally blocked by tall

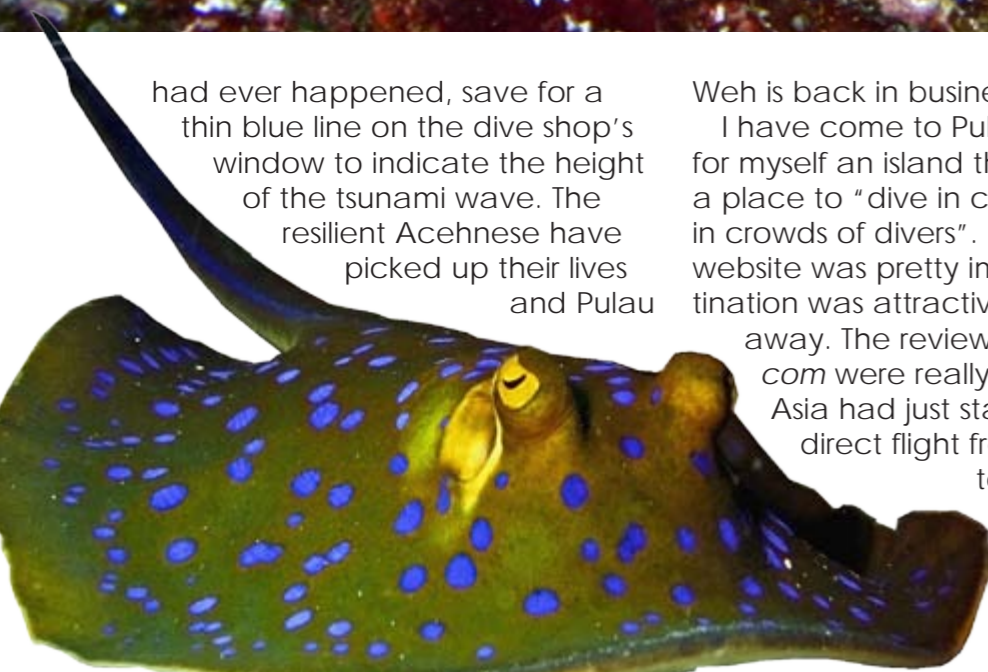
had ever happened, save for a thin blue line on the dive shop's window to indicate the height of the tsunami wave. The resilient Acehnese have picked up their lives and Pulau

Weh is back in business. I have come to Pulau Weh to discover for myself an island that is touted as a place to "dive in crowds of fish, not in crowds of divers". Lumba Lumba's website was pretty impressive, the destination was attractive and not too far away. The reviews on *Scubaboard.com* were really good, and Air Asia had just started a convenient direct flight from Kuala Lumpur to Banda Aceh. So, I asked myself, why not? There was the chance

and hassle free flight, a pass through a very primitive immigration line, and a hunt for my bags in a pile of luggage just dumped on the floor, my traveling partner, underwater photographer Asther Lau, and I were on our way to the Ulee Lheue ferry terminal. On the way, we stopped by a solemn remnant of the tsunami—a mass grave. There were no grave stones there, just an empty grassy field where all the unidentified victims were buried. The place is peaceful, and a few Acehnese can be seen praying and weeping.

buildings that are now gone.

Pulau Weh
Pulau Weh is an active volcanic island that rises hundreds of meters from the sea floor.



Blue spotted stingray



Honeycomb moray of Rubiah Sea Garden



Gapang

We stayed at a brand new bungalow overlooking the beach. In the mornings from our balcony, I could hear the chirping of birds, insects, cocks crowing in the distance and the sound of the waves as they lapped the beach. All this together with tall coconut trees surrounding our bungalow gave the place a serene atmosphere.

Lumba Lumba Diving Centre has been in operation for ten years now and has recently completed the last of seven new bungalows. They also have very ambitious plans to upgrade all the bungalows with air conditioning, hot water, wireless internet and even a new swimming pool.

It's an easy hop to the dive shop where the Acehnese dive masters love to hang out between dives. Out in front of the shop is a nice area where you can sit around to fill up your log book.

We went to Dangdangna Restaurant for breakfast, located just next door, where the resident top dog 'Cheeky' came over and sat under our table on the sand. I buried my feet in his nice fur and gave him a massage with my feet. He really loved it. Here, the food came in big portions and was very tasty, too.

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Elegant dartfish; Clownfish; Leaf scorpionfish; Longnose hawkfish; Fire dartfish; Acehnese children playing on the beach; Bungalows at Lumbalumba Diving Centre



The recent conflict between the Free Aceh Movement and the

Indonesian Army has not affected Pulau Weh as the fighting was confined to the Aceh mainland.

Under martial law, a blue book system was implemented. Foreign visitors had to get a 14-day visa in Medan before proceeding to Banda Aceh, and from there, were escorted by police all the way to Pulau Weh.

Since the 2005 peace agreement, all fighting has stopped, and divers have started to return. The new Air Asia flight now makes it really easy to get here. Whereas in the past, the only flights to Pulau Weh were from Medan or Jakarta.

From the ferry terminal in Balohan, it's an hour ride on a bumpy and twisty mountainous road to Gapang. We occasionally got glimpses of the sea and some very interesting wildlife such as monkeys, wild boars, monitor lizards, goats, cows and buffaloes.



The friendly donut lady

The owner of Dangdangna, Syukur, was the man who found the Megamouth shark lying on the beach. He actually wanted to sell the shark in the market and called Ton and Marjan to have a look. "We were surprised to find a shark with a big mouth and contacted scientists to help identify it," said Marjan. That shark later became the 21st confirmed sighting of the rare megamouth shark. In the end, Shukur was paid a finder's fee, and the shark is now



Loyal little customer

I was told that she managed to put her children through university just by selling her delicious donuts. She is somewhat of a celebrity here; it seems everyone survives on her donuts!

Gapang Beach is a very nice and quiet place. It's easy to relax here without being pestered by souvenir sellers. The only time it is noisy is during the weekends when locals and NGOs come for a break.

A pack of friendly dogs roam the beach everyday. The Muslim Acehnese are surprisingly very tolerant of the dogs and don't mind them one bit. Occasionally, the dogs will get into fights and disturb the peace, so we had to play policeman.

Mouthwatering donuts make a great snack after diving

in a museum near Jakarta.

Back at the resort, the donut lady comes over with her basket of freshly made donuts everyday.

As I ate my breakfast and admired the view of Sabang harbour in the distance, I could not but also admire a very ingenious invention made by our boatman. It was a simple but very effective boat landing system. Ropes were tied to the

Lumbalumba's diveboats moored at the line

base of a large tree on the beach leading out 100m into the bay where they were anchored to a buoy. Whenever a dive boat needed to land, all the boatman had to do was tie the boat to metal rings at the bow and stern, ride along these ropes, and just back up onto the beach. This way, the boatman was able to land the boat in rough weather, at night and at different tides without damaging the corals. Brilliant!

The house reef

The house reef was beautiful and had a lot of diversity in flora and fauna. It was a place with a varied landscape. Wading out from the beach along the line, it was recommended to wear booties, as stepping on the rocks was quite uncomfortable.

Heading straight out, we came across the resident Hawksbill turtle resting in the corals. Over at a sandy area, were garden eels. I swam over to some staghorn corals. From a distance, it looked like I had come across some swaying grass, but it was actually schools of razor fish dancing above the staghorns.

At a spot with an artificial reef ball and beer bottles, lived the resident ornate



Cheeky, the top dog



Razorfish dancing in the staghorns



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Scorpion fish; Ornate ghost pipefish; Cockatoo waspfish; Portrait of a Scorpion fish; Peacock mantis shrimp; Batfish



Whip goby

ghost pipe fish. Scorpion and lion fishes loved to hang out here, too. Past a field of mushroom corals was a small coral outcrop teeming with fishes. It was pleasant just lying there looking at all the schools of juvenile snapper, cardinal fish, anthias, goat fish, trumpet fish and grouper.

Nearby, was a lone 3m long whip coral, the home of some whip gobies. Everywhere scorpion fishes and moray eels were quite common, and I spotted my first octopus. Since I started diving, the only octopus I had ever seen was the one connected to my regulator!

The day was coming to an end when we spotted an unusually large longhorn cowfish that was about to go to sleep. Ending the dive, we looked up at the darkening sky and saw huge bats flying as high as eagles. Very nice for a first dive...

On the second dive, we spot-



ted cockatoo waspfish doing their usual thing swaying in a make-believe surge. I also just managed to catch a glimpse of a comet longfin's tail just before it disappeared in some coral. Going back to the tunicate infested line, we saw some big sized needle fishes, sergeant majors and a juvenile spiny lobster.

Coming back for a night dive,

one can find the razor fishes sleeping among the stag-horns and the very hairy red reef lobster that only comes out at night. Other than that, the house reef is also good for frog fish, sea moth and the elusive mimic octopus.

Batee Tokong

This was a huge place; we only managed to explore one side of it. Batee Tokong was a round plateau with rocky slopes and walls.

There were tons of fish here. It was like diving in bouillabaisse! Mostly anthias, red tooth trigger fish and fishes that love current, because this place tumbled like a washing machine. The current was very fierce, unpredictable and came from all directions making where you went all depend on the current's strength and direction.

There was even a place called Arus Paleh meaning 'bastard current' in the local dialect. A dive here, or at its close neigh-



bor's, Rubiah North, will indeed make you come up swearing at the current. You will either love it or hate it. For me, it was the latter, because I usually dive only in mild currents.

And I couldn't help thinking that this would be a great place in which to lose your evil step mother. The surge was wild, and the fishes loved it. It was a trade off to see such variety and numbers, yet many a time, we would





Pulau Weh



have to fight the current to seek shelter and hold on for dear life. It was during this time that we discovered more fishes under the rocks: Squirrel fish, grouper, sweetlip and the occasional sting ray.



There were lots of freckled hawkfish sitting on green tree corals and fire gobies darting around on the bottom. Neon fusiliers and rainbow runners swarmed by like locust, while red tail butterfly fish

schooled in large numbers. It was also said to be the number one place to see morays, and it was absolutely true. You could find all sorts of species here, such as white eye, giant, spot face, honeycomb, snowflake, whitemouth, zebra and yellow margined. Every other nook and cranny had at least one moray. Under rocks and ledges one may even find two or three of them. And they were all manned by big-sized, well-fed cleaner shrimp.

And if there were lots of morays, one would find lots of their favorite prey as well—octopus. This place should have been renamed 'Octopus Garden' after that Beatles' song.

The Canyon

Another great site was the Canyon. It had a unique topography that, not surprisingly, looked like a canyon! Divers usually started at the southern end of big black boulders. The



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Anthias schooling above giant clam; Red reef lobster; Cuttlefish; Lionfish; Hawksbill turtle; Yellow featherstar



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Artificial reef ball at Gapang house reef; The funnel of the tugboat wreck; Underwater hotspring; Serene Gapang Beach; Ubiquitous scorpionfish; Sleeping parrotfish

terrain sloped down to a lot of small rocks and finally to a sandy bottom beyond 30m. Here, the anthias started to school. This time there wasn't much current, but the water clarity was very good.

Heading west, then turning north at the corner, we found a wall that

went down to 50m. At 30m, there was a small cave, and if one shined one's light into it, one could see soft corals and big snappers hiding there. At the bottom was an excellent dense sea fan garden, and divers could spot the special blue variety.

Back to the wall, the fishes started to thicken in numbers until one got that diving in bouillabaisse feeling again. Here, that slogan, "Dive in crowds of fish, not in crowds of divers" really came true.

The colors started to come alive as the fishes danced in the unpredictable current along a wall that was festooned with sponges, tunicates and feather stars.

Scorpion fishes sit on the ledges here, so be careful.

One façade was even blanketed with blue and white little soft corals that made it look like it had just snowed.

On the top, we found schools of yellow goat fish, all sorts of trigger fish, barracuda and star fishes.

The 25-minute boat ride back to the dive shop gave us the opportunity to talk about one big Napoleon wrasse that came only an arm's length from our masks.

Suddenly, it started to rain heavily, and my buddies who had stripped down to their bikinis were shivering from the freezing wind.



As we approached the beach at Lumba Lumba, we saw a scene that could only be described as mystical. We could see the trees at the water's edge, but beyond

it, everything was foggy, obscured by the rain and clouds, and the water had changed to an emerald green. The whole scene looked like a dream, like the misty banks of a lake in winter, and this was the tropics!

As the boat backed up along the line, it was a magical moment. It was truly beautiful, and at the same time, mystical. As suddenly as this scene appeared before our eyes, it disappeared when the rain





Pulau Weh

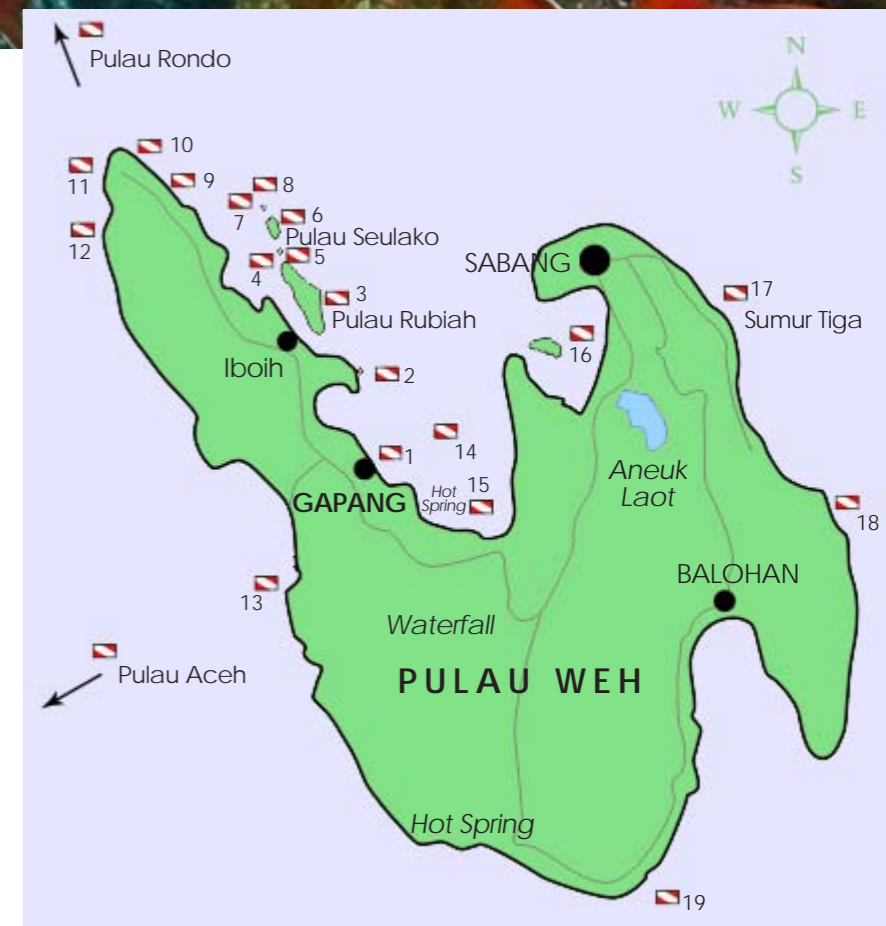
abruptly stopped and the fog lifted. It left a lasting impression in our minds. We saw something really beautiful, and we felt fortunate.

aft deck was the hunting ground of numerous pipe fishes and groupers hid in the open holds. On the top, trumpet fishes swam along the line that led to the buoy. Around the keel, one could find scorpion fish, and on the muddy bottom, lizard fish waited for prey.

Tugboat wreck & underwater hot spring

In Sabang bay, lying perfectly upright in 14m of water was the wreck of a tugboat. It was surprisingly in very good condition with little coral growth. The 17m long wreck made a very relaxing and easy wreck dive in very clear water with no current at all. Believed to have sunk in the 1970s, this wreck was teeming with fish.

Congregations of striped large-eye bream, anthias and damsel fishes could be seen inside and around the wheelhouse. The



PULAU WEH SITES: 1) BATEE DUA GAPANG; 2) BATEE MEURORON; 3) RUBIAH SEAGARDEN; 4) RUBIAH UTARA; 5) ARUS BALEE; 6) SEULAKO'S DRIFT; 7) BATEE TOKONG; 8) SHARK PLATEAU; 9) PANTEE IDEU; 10) BATEE GLA; 11) PANTEE ANEUK SEUKE—THE CANYON; 12) PANTEE PEUNATEUNG; 13) LHONG ANGEN & PANTEE GUA; 14) LIMBO GAPANG; 15) WW II WRECK SOPHIE RICKMERS; 16) WRECK TUGBOAT & UW HOTSPRING; 17) SUMUR TIGA; 18) ANOI HITAM; 19) BATEE MEUDURO



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Banded cleaner shrimp; School of juvenile snappers; Barrel sponge and Anthias; Squirrel fish; Dive map of Pulau Weh; Giant moray eels and cleaner shrimp

Pulau Weh

LEFT TO RIGHT: Diver and Sea fan; Nudibranch; School of barracudas



A dive to this wreck is usually followed with a dive to one of Pulau Weh's most unique sites. In Pria Laot Bay, there is an underwater hot spring. One cannot escape the unmistakable smell of sulphur as the gas bubbles break the surface of the water.

Underwater, the terrain was

a featureless shallow slope of black sand no deeper than 10m. Bubbles came out from the sandy bottom in steady fast streams to the surface.

Some divers said it looked like a jacuzzi, but I likened it to a boiling kettle. In large holes, the bubbles emerged violently, and

it was possible to feel the heat with one's hands. It was also very surprising to find Moorish idols and goat fish happily swimming around the bubbles. A truly unique diving experience.

Pantee Peunateung & other sites

Located on the western side of the island and just next door to the Canyon, Pantee Peunateung or Rice Paddies, was another favorite of divers. The terrain here was interesting, but the Canyon was much better. Nevertheless, this place was special as it was famous for its big pelagics.

Another group of divers reported dropping down into a school of barracudas and swimming through a massive school of a few hundred big eye trevallies. Then a friendly turtle got really close to the divers, while a giant Napoleon

wrasse swam by. If that wasn't good enough, they were then greeted by some ten mantas!

On the way back, they spotted an odd-looking fin on the surface. It turned out to be a Mola Mola! Talk about luck.

If you want a more relaxing dive with less current, then Rubiah Sea Garden is a good bet. The main attractions here are the very big-sized honeycomb morays and beautiful red bubble anemones. We even saw a honeycomb moray with a twisted jaw. There was also a very friendly Hawksbill turtle, which had apparently been hand fed, because it was always going after someone's fingers.

For experienced deep divers and wreck buffs, there is the impressive German WWII cargo ship *Sophie Rickmers*, which is also located in Pria Laot Bay. It

was scuttled by her own crew to avoid Dutch capture.

The story goes that while her captain was entertaining the Dutch with drinks onboard, his crew was busy making holes in the hull, and that's why it sits upright on the bottom in more than 55 metres of water. This 134m long wreck is the home of large schools of bat fish and a gigantic grouper. A megamouth shark was also spotted here, so keep your eyes sharp.

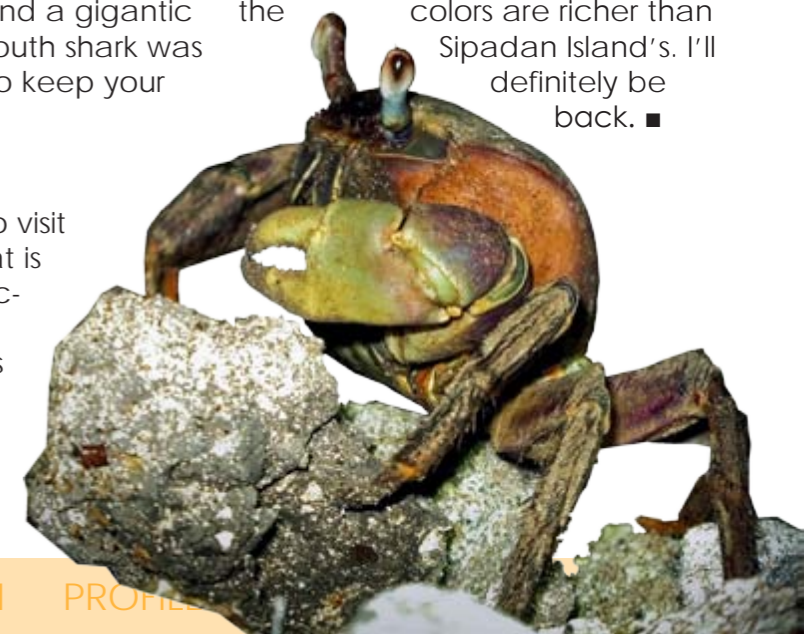
Conclusion

It's very refreshing to visit a great dive site that is in the opposite direction from the current diving hot spots of Indonesia such as Raja Ampat, Manado, Ambon

and Bali—all of which are located in the east while Pulau Weh is located in the west.

Coming to dive in Aceh helps its economy and reconstruction from the devastating effects of the tsunami.

Overall, the diversity and density of life in Pulau Weh is stunning; the reefs are very pristine and the colors are richer than Sipadan Island's. I'll definitely be back. ■



Crab on the beach

fact file



Indonesia



SOURCES: ANDY FERRARI, US CIA WORLD FACT BOOK, STARFISH.COM



LEFT: Location of Pulau Weh on regional map of Aceh, Indonesia
BELOW: Global map with location of Aceh in Indonesia



History In the early 17th century, the Dutch began to colonize Indonesia. From 1942 to 1945, the islands were occupied by Japan. After Japan's surrender in World War II, Indonesia declared its independence, but four more years passed mired by recurring hostilities and intermittent negotiations before the Dutch relinquished its colony. Indonesia is the largest archipelagic state in the world. It is home to the world's largest Muslim population. Current issues include: poverty, terrorism, strengthening democracy after 40 years of authoritarian rule, financial reforms, corruption, human rights violations by military and police personnel, and avian influenza. Indonesia reached a historic peace agreement in 2005 with armed separatists in Aceh. It led to democratic elections in December 2006. Indonesia must continue to confront a low intensity separatist guerilla movement in Papua. Government: republic. Capital: Jakarta

Geography Indonesia is located in Southeastern Asia. It is an archipelago between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, which consists of 17,508 islands, of which 6,000 are inhabited. Indonesia straddles the equator. It has a strategic location along major sea lanes from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. Terrain is mostly coastal lowlands with interior mountains on the larger islands. Lowest point: Indian Ocean, 0 m. Highest point: Puncak Jaya ,5,030 m. Coastline: 54,716 km. Natural hazards: floods occasionally, severe droughts, forest fires, tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanoes. Environmental issues: deforestation; water pollution from sewage and industrial wastes, urban air pollution in, smog from forest fires. Indonesia is party to the following international environmental agreements: Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Marine Life Conservation, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution, Tropical Timber 83, Tropical Timber 94, Wetlands

Economy Indonesia is a vast polyglot nation and has struggled to overcome the Asian financial crisis. It still struggles with persistent unemployment and poverty. It has inadequate infrastructure, corruption, a weak financial sector,

poor investment, and unbalanced resource distribution among regions. The country continues to gradually recover and rebuild after the devastating December 2004 tsunami as well as from an earthquake in central Java in May 2006 that caused damages and losses over \$3 billion. The current administration faces declining oil production, lack of new exploration investment, subsidized domestic fuel straining the budget in 2005, weak monetary policy, a run on the currency, a 126% average fuel price hike, lack-luster growth through mid-2006, heavy increases in rice prices, increase in people under the poverty line. Economic reforms aim to improve the investment climate, infrastructure, and strengthen the financial sector. There has been progress in rebuilding Aceh after the 2004 tsunami. Aceh now shows more economic activity than before the disaster. Unfortunately, Indonesia suffered another tsunami in South Java and major flooding in Jakarta in 2006-7 causing billions of additional dollars in damages.

Climate tropical; hot, humid; highlands are more moderate in climate

Population 245,452,739 (July 2006 est.) Internet users: 16 million (2005). Ethnic groups: Javanese 45%, Sundanese 14%, Madurese 7.5%, coastal Malays 7.5%, other ethnic groups 26%. Religions: Muslim 88%, Protestant 5%, Roman Catholic 3%, Hindu 2%, Buddhist 1%, other religions 1% (1998)

Currency Indonesian rupiah (IDR). Exchange rates: 1EUR=13,645 IDR, 1USD=9,235 IDR, 1GBP=17,120 IDR, 1AUD=8,022 IDR, 1SGD=6,536 IDR

Language Bahasa Indonesia is the official language and is a modified form of Malay. Other languages spoken: English, Dutch, local dialects (Javanese is most common)

Health Be prepared. Get your shots before you go to Indonesia. There is a high degree of risk for food or waterborne diseases including bacterial and protozoal diarrhea, hepatitis A and E, and typhoid fever. There is also a risk for vectorborne diseases in some locations. These diseases include dengue fever, malaria and chikungunya. Bird flu, or highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza, has been identified among birds in Indonesia. It poses a very low risk, but check with your doctor before you go.

Decompression Chambers
JAVA, Jakarta: Rumah Sakit Angkatan Laut (Navy Hospital) in Jl. Bendungan Hilir No.17, Central Jakarta

MALAYSIA, Lumut (near Pangkor Island): Department of Diving and Hyperbaric Medicine of the Armed Forces Hospital Lumut Naval Base. Phone: 05 - 683 7090 ext 4071

SINGAPORE: The Singapore Naval Medicine & Hyperbaric Center
Phone +65-750 5546

Web sites

- Lumba Lumba Diving Centre
www.lumbalumba.com
- Indonesia Tourism
www.indonesia-tourism.com
- Indonesia Tourism
my-indonesia.info/indexpromo.php
- Tourism Indonesia
www.tourismindonesia.com ■



Cool and comfy bungalow at Lumbalumba Diving Centre



Local kids lead a carefree life