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IN EAST BALI

Two outrages have transformed Bali's image from romantic idyll to terrorist target, yet it has so much to offer divers, as **Diego A Garcia** reports

ON A WOODEN OUTRIGGER, ROCKING IN THE SWELL of the Lombok Strait, divemaster Komang Regig briefs us in broken English. "This is dive site Toyapakeh on Nusa Penida Island. There is Bali."

He points westward to the mainland, stumbles a bit with a wave, and then gains his balance. "You can see swell is bad. Sometimes, strong current here also in deep, and water *dingin*... cold."

I look around the boat. Most divers are smiling, but a few look either nervous or seasick. We all gear up and seat ourselves in a line along the edge of the boat, ready to back-roll in one after another, swiftly, so as not to be separated by the surface current. Waves smack the side of the boat, almost knocking me into a premature entry.

Above right: Manta Point, a good place to find manta rays (below)



Nervous laughter. Komang yells for the first in line to roll in, then the second and, like skydivers jumping from a plane, the others drop.

"I'm scared," says a young Dutch woman, last in line after me. "I have never dived in currents."

How brave to admit her fear, I think to myself, knowing that she is not alone.

"Don't worry," says Komang. This seems to be the extent of his

encouragement. My turn comes and, not knowing what to do to ease her fears, I roll in. She follows.

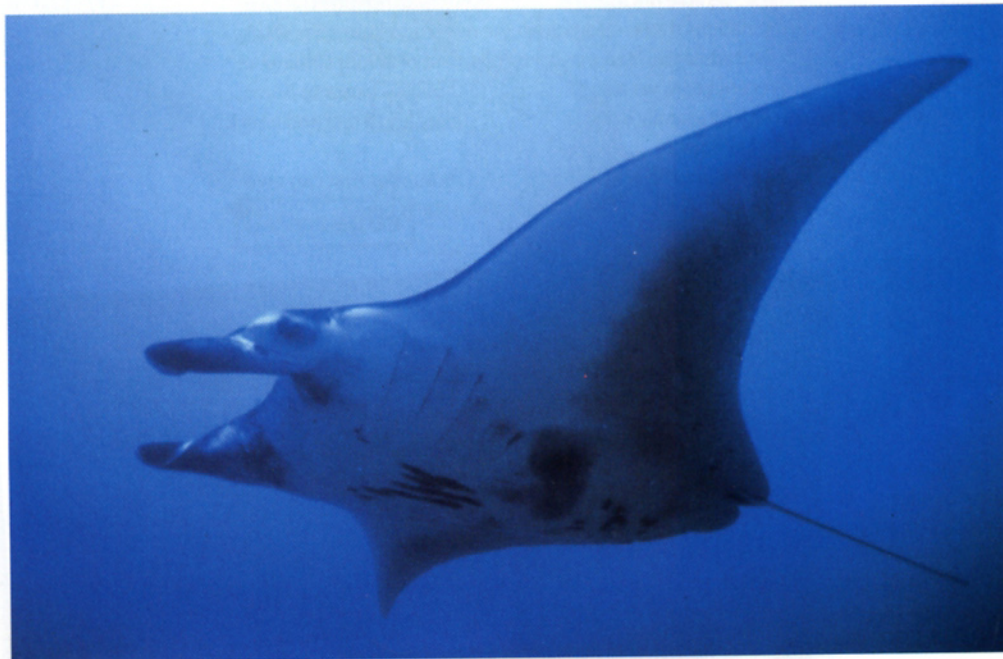
The group spends no more than a few seconds at the surface, bobbing in the waves, before descending together. At 3m depth, all is peaceful – no surge, gentle current. The cool wash of a thermocline meets us at 10m – a drop of 5° centigrade, from 27 to 22.

The sharp change in temperature is a shock to the system, and I look over to see how others are faring. The frightened woman appears uncomfortable but less afraid. Komang hugs himself – *dingin!* We press on to 20m, where the colour blue is perfected. The gentle sloping reef continues to 40, 50, possibly 60m, but our group staggers itself at different depths – a maximum of 28m.

Here, the current urges us south, ever so subtly. We abide. Most in our group obediently follow our divemaster, staying near to the reef and examining it closely. I let my mind wander and stare off into the blue, assigning myself the role of pelagic-spotter.

It's August, after all: the season for big things. I'm watching the blue for a good 20 minutes before I hear the familiar *clang clang* of someone banging a tank, calling for attention.

I look upslope and see a silvery *mola mola* headed straight for us. Apparently,





I had been looking in the wrong direction. The 5m tall oceanic sunfish surprises all of us, coming from the shallows and easing downslope, dividing our small group. Now everyone is smiling. No one is afraid.

Back on the boat the Dutch woman beams. "So, did you feel all right down there?" I ask.

"Yes, of course," she says. "I almost decided not to dive. I'm so happy I didn't stay on the boat. I would've missed the *mola!*"

Makes you nervous

In the weeks that follow, I dive many of eastern Bali's legendary sites. I learn that one can miss an awful lot from staying behind on the boat, including mantas, tuna, turtles – the works.

At the same time, I understand her fear. "You hear stories about the diving around Nusa Penida," says one apprehensive diver named Ray. "It kinda makes you nervous."

Just about every diver who contemplates getting wet in Penida has heard a story or two. This is perhaps because just about everyone who dives here comes away with a story to tell.

For instance, one sunny August day at the dive site called SD, my guide and I were hit hard with a downdraft of very warm water. The force of it was so strong that my divemaster would later remark, with a quiver of relished



adrenaline in his voice, that it almost tore the mask from his face.

Instinctively, we both looked for a non-stinging bit of substrate to hold onto, white-knuckled, while the onrush tried its best to pull us downwards.

After a few moments, the current relaxed enough that we continued on and enjoyed the rest of the dive. The downcurrent was scary, but neither of us wanted to stay on the boat for the next dive.

On another day, I chat with Mark Micklefield, a former dive-shop owner with tremendous experience under water in Bali. I show him my guidebook, which suggests that the diving around Nusa Penida is not for beginners.

"That's rubbish," says Mark. "It's all about what you're used to and what you're experienced in. If you never dive currents, you may always fear them, and if you fear them you might miss Penida's corals – they're probably the best in Bali."

It's a good point. After just two weeks of diving here, my skills in currents



vastly improved. In early October 2005, I crossed the strait to dive the Padang Bali area off mainland Bali. Here, dive sites are awash in the same nutrient-laden torrents that force-feed Penida, attracting similarly impressive wildlife.

At Tepekong I see another *mola mola*, twice on the same dive. At Mimpang

Clockwise from top: Cuttlefish; oceanic sunfish, or *mola mola*; stonefish



Clockwise from top left: Leaf scorpion featherduster; golden moray eel; green-yellow nudibranch

I see whitetip sharks, permanent residents of the reef there.

And near Blue Lagoon, literally five minutes from my hotel, I see cuttlefish, nudibranchs, turtles, more whitetips, and even the famous pygmy seahorse.

Yearning for total saturation, I follow a three-dive day with an early-morning

pair of submersions at Tepekong again. I seek excitement but find a harsh dose of reality. Coming up for air after our first dive, I rant and rave about how much I love this area. Others are less animated. Why so glum?

"Didn't you hear about what happened last night?" asks my dive buddy.

"Hear what?"

"Some bombs went off in south Bali."

The blood drains from my face. The corner of my eye twitches strangely. I had not heard. I had spent the entire previous evening with my wife and daughter, in our hotel room, with the TV off. It is the shattering of a myth when daydreams are interrupted by reality, by the loss of life.

Saddened, we talk distractedly, then seek solace in the sound of waves lapping against the boat. Sitting there, we wonder, what are we supposed to do? Leave Bali for a lesser known and therefore "safer" island? Or just go home? If we give in to our fear, does that mean the terrorists are winning?

Not knowing what else to do, we dive again. In the days that follow, the future for locals working in the tourism industry looks uncertain. It took a full three years, say the locals, for tourism to finally pick up again after the 2002 attacks. Who knows how long it will take this time?

Yet it becomes clear that Balinese people do not worry obsessively. One week after the bombs, all foreigners in Padang Bali are invited to join in the Hindu festival of *Galungan* – a celebration of the victory of good over evil.

The local temple is full of smiling people, children running, swirls of incense smoke, prayer and music. This restorative, strengthening celebration goes on all night for three nights.

Looking back, I wonder about the friends we made in Bali, many of whom invited me and my family with great welcomes into their homes. Will they be all right? Or will fear reign?

For me, there is no question that I will come back to Bali, to dive these sites again, because what I fear most is neither a torrid current nor a demented terrorist.

I fear living a life without freedom. Having that freedom demands that I plunge into life and savour it every day.

I refuse to stay behind on the boat, afraid of what may or may not come, while the best of life rushes by.

Sampai jumpa, Bali, see you soon.

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE: Fly from the UK to Padang Bali via Jakarta or Java with BA, Garuda or Cathay Pacific.

DIVING: Geko Dive Bali (Padang Bali), www.gekodive.com, World Diving Lembongan, www.world-diving.com

ACCOMMODATION: Dive centres can arrange hotel or bungalow accommodation for visiting divers.

WHEN TO GO: East Bali is best in *mola* season, from mid-July to mid-October, with September the best month. Mantas are spotted year round but from November-January, conditions are better in north or western Bali.

MONEY: Indonesian rupiah

COSTS: Return flights from around £675. Rooms cost from £3.50 a night for a basic beachfront single to £6 for a double, or enjoy luxury for £120-plus per night. Dives cost £12-15 each if a week-long package is obtained, though long-distance trips can cost £25 or so each. Restaurants are very cheap.

TOURIST INFORMATION: www.tourismindonesia.com

