Gangga, Bangka & Sangihe, Sulawesi

Soft coral spectacles and critter curiosities

“Just off to the northeastern tip of the starfish-shaped island of Sulawesi is the Bangka Archipelago. The largest of the islands are Bangka, Talisei and Gangga, of which Bangka is the biggest and justly famed for its luxuriant soft corals. In this marine-life-rich area one can see varieties of fish species and invertebrates that have rarely been encountered before – the local dive guides frequently spot new species for the area or even sometimes undescribed species.”

The Bangka Archipelago dive sites are most easily visited by liveaboard boat or by staying at the dive resort on delightful Gangga Island. There are over 25 dive sites in the area with fringing reefs, sharp coral pinnacles covered in especially beautiful soft corals and some truly magnificent soft coral gardens. It is easy to overlook the hard coral in this area, but it would be a shame to miss out on searching under frilly hard corals for groups of sweetlips or lurking frogfish. Bangka Island has sandy bays and rich tangles of tropical vegetation which frequently give way to mangrove areas and then to the ocean itself. Sahaung Island has most extensive soft coral gardens of a type rarely seen in this area. Descend to about 20 metres and look up at the glowing ‘flowers’ of orange, yellow, white, pink and blue corals festooning the low walls. To add to this enchanting technicolor display one may also witness black coral polyps feeding, along with the gorgeous citrus yellow polyps of the Tubastrea corals. Lihaga Island, close to Bangka Island, is the place to enjoy mandarinfish. The dive drops to 25 metres at its deepest and it is within the acropora coral gardens that these jewel coloured little fish can be found. Settle down in a comfortable spot and as the sun sinks below the horizon it seems as if little mice are scampering through the coral, but look harder and you will see that the ‘mice’ are actually mandarinfish. Suddenly you may see two fish rise together and display their brilliant colours of red, flashing shades of blue and green as they unite in a mating dance before each falls back and goes its separate way. The Gangga Island House Reef is a gently sloping volcanic reef with lovely soft corals and super sponges. Search for the gorgeous Ornate Ghost Pipefish or the amazing, ‘hairy’ Roughsnout Ghost Pipefish or the very elusive and cryptic Glittering Pipefish, amongst a host of other creatures that make their homes in and on the reef. A night dive here (for those staying at the resort) will reward the diver with sparkling shrimp eyes, pulsating cuttlefish and some big octopuses.

Further to the north, and only accessible by liveaboard, lies a chain of volcanic islands called the Sangihe-Talaud Archipelago: dozens of islands, some of which are over 1500 meters high and densely covered by coconut palms and forest. This area has some of the deepest and clearest water on the planet and offers the chance of encounters with large pelagics or even whales. In this area semi-active underwater volcanoes are still releasing gas bubbles into the sea, forming ‘shower curtains’ of tiny silver bubbles.

Siau Island is home to one of Indonesia’s most active volcanoes, Karangetang Volcano, and at night it is possible to see the peak of the volcano glowing red in the darkness. At Eddy Point, off Siau Island, it does not take more than a few seconds to realize that this is a dive site close to an active volcano: black porous rubble is everywhere, but the real surprise may come later when you may hear a series of rumblings: the volcano is rumbling away! Batu Lehi, south of Eddy Point, is a dramatic wall dive with masses of Tubastrea coral and some beautiful colonial anemones. A popular spot for a night dive, the area is full of lobsters and crustaceans of many kinds. Decorator crabs are common and it is possible to see cuttlefish and Blue-spotted Stingrays. Surface to find the volcano glowing red above you, then swim over to one of the volcanic hot springs to warm up and relax after the dive.

Close to Mahenge Tang Island is Banua Wuhu submarine volcano which rises more than 400 metres from the sea floor to form a shoal just less than 5 metres below sea level. With a whiff of sulphur in the air and an area of surge over the spiky top of the volcano, it is obvious you are at the right dive site! Unspoilt reefs hold amazing coral formations: cabbage corals making beautiful swirling patterns and soft corals in many shades of pink, orange and yellow. Some of the barrel sponges in this area are over a metre and a half in height! Leaving this fabulous reef behind, the
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scenery changes as yellow sulphurous deposits cover the area like a thick coating of dust as one approaches the extraordinary feature of this dive site: huge boulders and volcanic rubble which release hot gas and sulphur. The bubbles form an almost transparent curtain through which reef fish dart and play.

GANGGA ISLAND RESORT & SPA, & GANAAA DIVERS

This small resort on idyllic Gangga Island rests on a gorgeous vanilla coloured sandy beach surrounded by tropical gardens and native trees. Above the resort a thick jungle rises up the hillside. To reach the resort it is an hour’s drive from Manado followed by a short sea trip across the Bangka Strait. Then, as you go ashore, there is that first chance to dip your toes in the warm sea and feel the silky sand between your toes – a romantic approach to a romantic island! Gaspare and Hanne manage the resort with the professional touches acquired during their training in hotel management in Denmark and Switzerland. This small ‘eco’ resort is an ideal choice for keen divers looking for friendly, high quality and efficient service, good food and comfort. Non-diving partners will appreciate relaxing in a beautiful setting and are sure to enjoy the fabulous spa treatments available.

The accommodation comprises fifteen semi-detached, high-ceilinged beachfront bungalows, each built on stilts in local style and with local materials. All the air-conditioned rooms have a veranda overlooking the beach and are furnished with modern decor. En-suite bathrooms have showers with hot and cold water. Amenities include ceiling fans, mosquito nets, min-bar, tea and coffee making facilities and safety deposit boxes. You can even request a TV with satellite international channels, should you wish.

A huge ‘eternity’ swimming pool at the water’s edge provides for a refreshing dip when the diving is done for the day or on that last day without diving.

There is a choice of two restaurants. The main restaurant is located in the centre of the resort and offers a selection of both Mediterranean and Indonesian dishes. Chef prides himself on using the freshest local ingredients wherever possible. The outdoor restaurant, known as Bamboo Restaurant, serves fresh fish barbecues two nights a week. Local musicians perform Polynesian-style music while you dine. The Coconut Bar is open all day long for cool, tropical fruit drinks, tea and coffee or a selection of cocktails, beer and wine to enjoy when the diving is over. Perhaps order your favourite cocktail and sip it slowly as you take a sunset stroll along the beach.

The Pasung Spa specialises in local knowledge of plants and herbs and local techniques of massage. Aromatherapy treatments are used to soothe tired muscles and keep the skin healthy and supple. Treatments include body scrubs, traditional massage, reflexology, facials and foot and head massages.

Gangga Divers have five all-wooden boats. Three have on-board toilets. Each boat has a stock of towels, freshwater rinse tanks for cameras, drinking water and hot drinks. Snacks are offered between dives. As members of the North Sulawesi Watersports Association, the resort is committed to protecting local reefs and promoting conservation and development projects amongst the local communities. Packages include either 2 dives per day, or a 3 dives per day to include lunch on board within the Bangka Island Archipelago. Dive trips to Lembeh Straight or to the Bunaken Marine Park, and night dives, can be arranged locally for an additional fee. Nitrox is available for an additional fee.

Price: from about £94 per night.
Includes: full board accommodation (breakfast, lunch and dinner) on a twin/ share basis at Gangga Island Resort and Spa. Various dive packages are available: for example, an 11 dives package (including one night dive) costs from about £289. Non-divers must pay from about £40 for a Sport Card that entitles them to have free use of the snorkeling boat Christina twice daily, a free diving lesson in the pool and a guided excursion to the villages on Gangga. Airport transfers cost from about £40 return. Deposit: £200.

Single Occupancy Supplement: from about £13 per night.

PARADISE DANCER & NORTH SULAWESI AGRESSOR

Both these liveaboards combine the very best of North Sulawesi diving. They sail from the Lembeh Strait and spend part of their itinerary exploring the extraordinary ‘macro-critter’ dive sites in the strat, but they also take in Manado’s famous Bunaken Marine Park and the superb Bangka Archipelago. Paradise Dancer, which has longer cruises, also explores the remote and little-known Sangihe-Talaud Archipelago to the north of Sulawesi.

PARADISE DANCER

The latest vessel to serve under the new famous blue and white Dancer livery, Paradise Dancer at 43 metres in length is the largest vessel in the fleet. Constructed from wood she is a three masted motor schooner and is
Gangga, Bangka & Sangihe, Sulawesi
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Paradise Dancer carries a maximum of 18 passengers in 9 independently controlled air-conditioned staterooms each with private head and shower. All the staterooms are larger than traditional liveaboard staterooms. The Master and Commander Suite at the stern of the boat and on the Main Deck features a king sized bed, private head and shower and picture window views. This top of the range stateroom also has a separate seating area with sofa, table and chairs, designed to evoke the captain’s quarters of US Schooners circa 1800. Eight Deluxe Staterooms on the Lower Deck each have either two twin beds or one king-sized bed, private head and shower and picture window views. Each cabin provides a quiet and elegant space for relaxing, reading or sleeping. Towelling robes are provided for your stay on the boat. Clean towels are provided daily and clean sheets are provided mid-week. Complimentary toiletries are placed at the wash basin and each cabin has a built-in hairdryer. The crew offer superb service at all times, from morning coffee in your room to taking your tank at the dive platform on your return to the boat or providing hot towels at the end of a night dive.

The dive centre is where the compressor is kept, but guests do not have to handle their tanks and equipment. All diving is done from tender boats and dive gear remains on the tender boats, other than when Paradise Dancer is moving. Spacious benches on the main deck provide an area for putting on wet suits. Special rinse tanks for cameras are situated in the dive centre. Dive information is displayed on a large board which shows depth and marine life information. There are two showers on the main deck for that rinse down after the dive. A full camera and video rental service is available at daily or weekly rates. The boat has a photo pro on board who will assist you with your photography and also, if you wish, take a customized video of your diving holiday. Paradise Dancer offers Nitrox facilities at an extra charge and a range of courses including PADI Advanced Open Water, IANTD, TDI and PADI Nitrox certification, Rebreather certification and Paul Humann Fish and Creature Identification. A full range of diving equipment is available for rental.

After diving most people relax (either in or out of the sun) and help themselves to iced drinks and delicious snacks. Two computer stations are available in the lounge area for those who have digital cameras. Freshly baked breads and biscuits show up in the morning and appetizers are served in the afternoon. Beverages and snacks are available at all times in the salon (along with a well-stocked bar). Meals are one of the highlights of the day. Hot breakfasts are cooked to order. Lunch is usually a buffet-style spread and dinner is waiter served. Wine is served with dinner and after dinner drinks are always offered.

Paradise Dancer operates out of the harbour at Bitung City, situated on the Lembeh Strait not far from Manado, for 11 nights cruises between April and September, cruising to Bangka Island, the Sangihe Islands, Bunaken Marine Park and Lembeh Strait.

Cruise Itinerary: After a check out dive and a night dive in the Lembeh Strait, Paradise Dancer sets sail for Bangka Island, stopping at Pulisan en route. From Bangka the boat heads 62 nautical miles north bound for Makalehi Island stopping at dive sites en route before spending the night at Siau Island. Before dawn on the fourth day the boat reaches the most northerly point of the itinerary at Mahengetang Island, where she stays for the next day, making stops at dive sites around the island. After diving the two underwater dive sites at Benau Wuhu, the vessel steams south once more to Bawondeket Island then on to Mahoro Island for a night dive. Day 6 sees the vessel visiting Ruang Island before spending the night at Biaro Island. Before dawn on day 7 the boat sets sail for the Bunaken Marine Park near Manado for a full day’s diving. After a night dive in the marine park Paradise Dancer returns to the Lembeh Strait for the last two days of diving. (For details of diving at famous Lembeh Strait, see the following Kungkungan Bay entry in this brochure.)

Price: from about £2039. Includes: airport transfers; 11 nights cruise on Paradise Dancer on a twin/share basis with full board, including soft drinks, wine, beer and spirits; 9 full days of diving (3 or 4 dives per day, including night dives) plus one or two dives on the last day. Reductions for divers 65 or over, non-divers and extra cruises. In addition, there is a port tax and National Park Fee of about £43 and a fuel surcharge of about £108 (subject to change) which have to be prepaid. Deposit: £700.
Single Occupancy Supplement: 65% of the cruise cost (but you can avoid paying the supplement if you are willing to share a cabin).

**NORTH SULAWESI AGGRESSOR**

The North Sulawesi Aggressor is a very comfortable liveaboard that carries a maximum of 18 passengers in eight staterooms with air conditioning and private head and shower. Seven Deluxe Staterooms each have a lower double bed and a single upper bed, while the Quad Stateroom has four single beds. Seven crew members make sure that your diving holiday runs smoothly. Between dives guests can relax on the sundeck (either in or out of the shade) or try the amazing hot tub! The salon has an excellent collection of books, videos and music to enjoy.

The dive deck covers the aft third of the main deck. Large gear lockers double as seats and line the rails and centre. Two tanks are mounted at the back of each locker, either in or out of the shade, or try the amazing hot tub! The salon has an excellent collection of books, videos and music to enjoy.

For after the dive there is a freshwater shower and clean towels awaiting, as well as the chef’s freshly prepared snacks to appease the after-dive hunger pangs! Delicious barbecues, American and local dishes are served; breads, biscuits and baked snacks come straight from the oven. Most meals are served buffet-style.

North Sulawesi Aggressor operates out of Kungkungan Bay Resort, situated in Lembeh Strait not far from Manado, for 7 nights cruises, departing every Saturday throughout the year. Cruise itineraries include the fabulous ‘critter’ diving in the Lembeh Strait, the wonderful soft corals of Bangka Island and the amazing coral gardens and creatures of the Bunaken Marine Park near Manado.

**Price:** from about £1360. Includes: airport transfers; 7 nights cruise on North Sulawesi Aggressor on a twin/share or quad/share basis with full board (except dinner on the last night), including non-alcoholic and local alcoholic beverages; 5 full days of diving (up to 4 or 5 dives per day, including night dives) plus one or two dives on the last day. Reductions for divers 65 or over, non-divers and extra weeks. Dinner on the last night is not included, but guests will be provided with guidance about good local restaurants. Deposit: £650.

**STOP-OVERS:** These are available in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta or Denpasar, depending on flight routing.

**COMBINATIONS:** If you are staying shore-based, why not combine an exploration of the Bangka Archipelago with a stay in the Manado region or a stay at the fabulous Lembeh Strait, world famous for its unusual creatures and especially its ‘macro life’. Or even take in all three? As you will be passing through Singapore or Kuala Lumpur en route, side trips to any other famous diving area in Southeast Asia can also be arranged. Talk to us about the possibilities.

**FLIGHTS:** Prices from about £811 to Manado. There are daily flight connections to Manado (but the quickest and least expensive routings are not every day). We will quote you the airfare applicable, based on routing, season, current fare levels and booking class availability. Our quote will include all taxes and fuel supplements applicable at the time of quotation, as well as our service charge. The usual airfare deposit is £300.