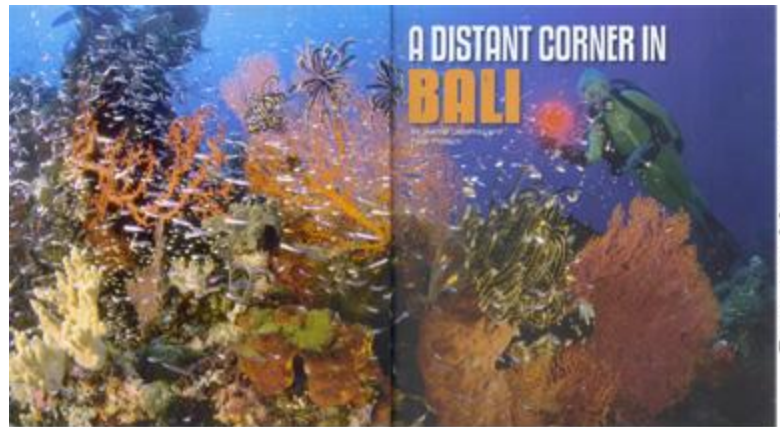


A distant corner in Bali
By Jeanne Liebetrau and Peter Pinnock



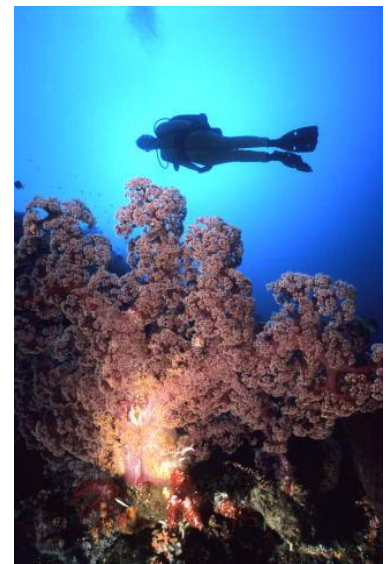
Diversions Magazine

The coral reef extends another mile or so into the distance in front of Mimpi Bay and back to the bay. The boat lifts a fine sea spray which is a welcome relief from the heat. Ahead a similar perahu is full of happy snorkelers and behind us another has a congregation of Hindu worshippers. The skipper steers with one hand only as he is engrossed in conversation with the crew. He has made his offerings to the Hindu gods at his temple on top of his perahu and knows we are safe. We are in absolutely no hurry to reach Menjangan Island, far from the maddening hustle and bustle of city life, far from thousands of scooters and even further from the rush of tourists and T-shirt sellers. This is the quiet north-west corner of Bali, a place to relax and chill out.

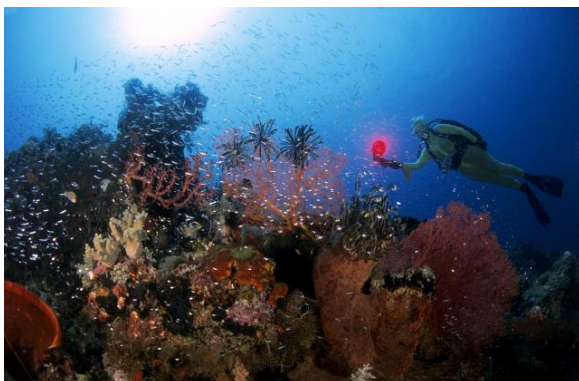


The long blue and white wooden perahu chugs out of the protected bay in front of Mimpi

Resort and heads into slightly choppy waters. The boat lifts a fine sea spray which is a welcome relief from the heat. Ahead a similar perahu is full of happy snorkelers and behind us another has a congregation of Hindu worshippers. The skipper steers with one hand only as he is engrossed in conversation with the crew. He has made his offerings to the Hindu gods at his temple on top of his perahu and knows we are safe. We are in absolutely no hurry to reach Menjangan Island, far from the maddening hustle and bustle of city life, far from thousands of scooters and even further from the rush of tourists and T-shirt sellers. This is the quiet north-west corner of Bali, a place to relax and chill out.



Menjangan Island National Park is protected by mainland Bali, currents are rare and the visibility is crystal clear. The island is surrounded by walls reaching depths of 30 -60 meters. The snorkelers and the devotees head towards a jetty on a small wind protected beach. We head for Eel Garden on the eastern side of the island. Putu, our dive guide, assures us that diving in these parts is leisurely and relaxed, we can dive any depth and in any direction. Eel Garden starts with a dive on a steep wall. In gin clear water large pink gorgonian seafans and soft corals are juxtapositioned along the wall. Bushy crinoids balance on the rims of sturdy barrel sponges and feather stars are furled deep in the grooves. Clumps of red seawhips waft gently in the breeze. In the calm water fish swim languidly in no particular direction.



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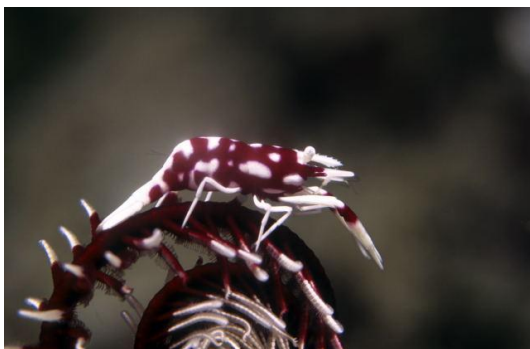


The serenity is broken by a school of blue-fin kingfish speeding past us. The kingfish break formation plummeting towards a soft coral outcrop scattering thousands of schooling glassies. The kingfish regroup as they head towards the surface and then return for another assault. Below the corals a lazy scorpionfish is on high alert - seizing glassies straying in his direction. Excited by the action, a coral rockcod rushes in to take a few gulps of the glassies which are now herding together.



In the shallows a sandy slope is pitted with tunnels, home to the grumpy looking jawfish and timid garden eels. Putu beckons us to a large coral bommie. He points to a darkly coloured crinoid. One of the arms appears to be detached and is swimming freely. We

scrutinize it more closely and find it is a juvenile male harlequin ghost pipe-fish. Putu tings loudly on his cylinder with his pointer. Irritated, we turn to see why he is making a noise. He has found another 2 male pipefish hiding within a small sea fan. Fascinated by these rare fish swimming vertically mimicking the crinoid we settle down to take photographs. Putu tings again. We both look up to see what he has found this time. He proudly points out another male and a large female. I am astonished - 5 harlequin ghost pipefish on just one coral bommie! As we wait for the male and female to pose perfectly for a photograph, Putu tings again. I swim over to investigate, but I am disgusted to find he is calling us for a common nudibranch on a sponge. From thereon we ignore his tings.



In between dives we relax on Menjangan Island. The Hindu devotees are placing offerings of fruit and incense at one of the 5 temples on the island; the snorkelers are floating in the water at the end of the jetty and a wild deer grazes a few meters from sun worshippers. The atmosphere is very relaxed. Putu calls us for a dive on Coral Gardens on the west of the island. We swim a short way along a wall until we reach a large expanse of



shallow water littered with coral bommies. We find a crimson crinoid shrimp that has vacated the sanctity of its host's feet and is crawling openly along one of the arms. Tickled by the movement on its sensitive hairs, the crinoid curls its arm inwards but the shrimp hops onto the adjacent arm and scuttles along the length to the tip.



There is excellent diving both to the east and west of Menjangan. To the east lies Puri Jati, a sheltered bay that has evolved from being a fishing village to becoming a popular dive site recognized for its unusual fish species. It has an easy shore entry from the beach. The first 30 meters of black sand slopes gently down to 6m depth. This moonscape is seemingly devoid of life. We swim over hundreds of

thumb-size corals dispersed across the slope. We pass over meadows of short sea-grasses as we search for strange and unusual creatures. Longspine urchins congregate in patches and their pansy shell skeletons lie scattered over the reef. As we reach the deeper water we find many sand anemones hosting a variety of sea life. A large female anemone shrimp reveals her intestines and clutch of eggs on her see-through body. Nearby, another anemone is swarming with baby damselfish.



The damsels are nervously crowding together as they desperately seek shelter in the flat anemone. Something is worrying them. It takes a few minutes before we realize that the adjacent tangle of dirty reef debris is actually a hairy frogfish hunting the vulnerable damsels. We start to look closely at all other bundles of debris and discover more hairy frog fish, juvenile lionfish and flying gunards. A mess of floating reeds and fishing line turns out to be a pair of hairy ghost pipefish. Unlike their relatives at Menjangan, these are drab in colour and swim horizontally in the sea-grass. PJ's certainly offers some weird looking critters.





Putu suggests we go to Secret Bay, as the conditions are perfect with full moon



and an incoming tide in the midmorning. Secret Bay (Gilimanuk Bay) lies 20 minutes to the west of Mimpi near the dock for the ferries that run across the Bali Straits to Java. The sheltered bay is fed cold water from the current ridden straits making it a sanctuary for juvenile fish. We swim along a sandy bank covered in sea-grass. A large brown seahorse swims awkwardly between

grasses, wrapping its tail quickly around blades of grass for support. A thin green pipefish resembling the grass eases itself amid the gently swaying meadow.

As the depth increases to 6m the seagrass dwindles exposing the sandy slope. A motionless snake-eel's head pokes out of the sand. It sinks slowly into its hole as we approach. We disturb a cryptically disguised longtail seamoath. It scurries across the sand displaying its wing-like pectoral fins. We stop at a clump of longspine urchins. The spines provide a haven



for the exquisite aboriginal art-inspired Banggai cardinalfish.



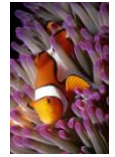
Years ago divers erected metal cages to encourage hard coral growth. Fish congregate in these rusting metal cages that are encrusted with clams, barnacles and corals. Perched on the struts of one cage a large yellow frogfish is waving its pompom shaped esce in the hope of luring a fish.

Another smaller red frogfish is resting adjacent to a red leaf oyster. Deeper inside the cage we spot a grey giant frogfish and a striped frogfish. Juvenile lionfish swim easily between the struts. A sunken wooden barge is crammed with

striped catfish packed so close together they appear to be gasping for breath. The smaller catfish swim continuously in a tight ball formation while the larger catfish rest on the floorboards of the scuttled boat.



Eventually our eyes tire from searching for weird and wonderful



creatures and we wade out of the ocean. We have not swum more than 100m in pond-like conditions. The diving is relaxing yet we can't wait to return to Mimpí Resort where a natural thermal hot spring pool awaits us. The water has therapeutic and calming properties. As we relax in our private pool we imbibe our surrounding zen garden. Frangipani flowers fall into the pool, a ceramic frog guards the pebble pathway and the breeze rustles leaves across the thatch roof. Another slow day in a distant corner of Bali.



Travel Contact: <http://www.Mimpi.com>

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