

A full-page underwater photograph. In the upper half, two divers are seen from below, swimming upside down. They are wearing full scuba gear, including tanks, regulators, and fins. Bubbles are visible around them. Below them, a vibrant coral reef is visible, featuring a prominent, flat, mushroom-shaped coral structure in the middle ground. The water is clear and blue, with light filtering down from the surface.

# SULAWESI SOJOURN

Travelling through the Togian Islands is like reliving history, discovers Rob Dunton, who also stumbled on excellent dive sites in this quiet cove.

Photos ROB DUNTON



I am not sure how old Maming is, but I am told he is over 90. He has lived and fished his entire life in the Togian Islands, a picturesque archipelago of 56 islands nestled in the Gulf of Tomini in Sulawesi, Indonesia.

Sulawesi, located east of Borneo, is the world's eleventh largest island and home to renowned diving destinations such as Siladen, Bunaken, Lembeh, Wakatobi and the Togians.

Maming was here during the Japanese occupation, and is now a widower living alone in a hut built half over the water and half on land, fashioned from sticks and boards foraged from the forest. He paddles his perahu dayung (small rowing boat) and makes his living building bamboo fish traps.

From my perspective, Maming's life seems hard, toiling for long hours to eke out a living from the sea. Sylvie Manley,

the proprietress of Togian Island Retreat and my interpreter, asks Maming if he would change anything about his life.

"What would I change?" Maming asks, almost surprised by the question. "Nothing," he responds, "I have what I need. If I am hungry, I go fishing. If today I have fish, then I am happy."

Maming calls himself Bajo, a sect of the Bajau who originated in the Philippines and migrated to parts of Indonesia and Malaysia. There are three major groups in the Togians — the Bajau, Bobongko and Togians. Outsiders often refer to the Bajau as "sea gypsies", as they were once a nomadic, seafaring people who lived at sea, following the migratory fish on which they depended. According to the Bajo interviewed for this article, the Bajau have lived on the Togian Islands for 600 to 700 years. They were more or less forced by early foreign colonialists to end their ocean-going life and settle on land, and their

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nomadic ways declined rapidly in the past century.

To see the fish and undersea world upon which Maming and other Bajo survive is what lured me to the Togian Islands. Indonesia is known for its sensational dive sites, and some of the most pristine locations are found at the Togian Islands, which are also found in one of the calmest bays in the world.

Formed by volcanic activity, the islands are covered with lush forest and surrounded by clear water and rich coral. Three different reef systems — ▶



fringing, barrier and atoll — exist here, providing habitats and breeding havens for 300 species of coral, an amazing array of fish, the dugong (part of the manatee family) and various turtle species.

After landing in Makassar in southern Sulawesi, it took almost three days to reach the Togian Islands by chartered car, coach and boat. This remoteness has helped keep the islands unspoiled and tranquil. When I set foot, at long last, on the dock of Togian Island Retreat, I was greeted by Sylvie Manley, her staff and a devoted pack of friendly dogs.

Island Retreat is located on Pulau Batudaka, surrounded by mangroves, jungle and white sandy beaches, about 30km from the equator. With no roads, phones, Internet connection or neighbours, it is a retreat in every sense of the word. Even fresh water is shipped in from the mainland. After meeting the other European guests staying

there and tucking into a communal supper of fresh grilled fish and home-baked bread, I retired to an oceanfront cottage built by local carpenters and relaxed on the veranda, beneath rustling palm fronds.

The following morning, I climbed aboard a perahu (a narrow wooden boat hand-built by local Bajo) with a 5.5 horsepower motor mounted on the back. I sat on the floor beneath a low palm-frond roof as Uwe, Island Retreat's German divemaster, handed me tanks and gear. With only two of us diving, there was no reason to take the larger boat. Once the perahu was loaded, Uwe pull-started the motor, and off we chugged to Palau Taupan's west reef, across the calmest open water I have ever seen. There was no wind, waves or swells, and not another dive boat in sight.

We set anchor in a strategic spot that wouldn't damage the unspoiled reef, tossed our rigged and inflated BCs into the water, put on our masks and descended

into the 29 deg C water. The reef was massive, vibrant and alive with fish and corals. Schools of jack circled overhead. Napoleon wrasses, snappers, fusiliers cruised about. Green, brown and purple tube sponges and calciferous barrel sponges were spotted among sheets of red gorgonian sea fans and fire coral.

We explored the crevices, canyons and overhangs, admired the schools of blue-lined snappers, clown triggerfish, lyre-tail anthias, and saw a moray eel. Colourful nudibranchs held fast to gorgonian fans, while cuttlefish scurried away as we approached. The colour, quality and diversity was astounding; after two dives, we headed back.

Uwe had me drooling with his tales of some of the rarer sights he has seen: A dolphin, a marlin, black- and white-tip sharks, and a massive school of barracuda. He had even heard of rare encounters with dugong and orca.

Over the next three days, Uwe took



me and a handful of other Island Retreat guests on one brilliant dive after another. On my last night, a storm rolled in with the first rain we have had since I arrived. Come morning, rumours were circulating that one of the Bajo had been caught by the storm and not been found; we feared the worst. I saw more boats on the horizon than usual, and wondered if they were still searching for the missing fisherman.

I checked out of my beach bungalow and hired a married pair of Sylvie's staff to take me north to Black Marlin Dive Resort to explore more of the Togians. I joined the couple and their son in their simple perahu and we made our way through inner waterways lined with mangrove.

Two hours later, I am dropped off at Black Marlin Dive Resort where guests were playing a spirited game on the soft beach. One of the resort's dive boats lay submerged near the shore; sunk by the recent storm, its engine was already removed, dismantled and drying on the dock. The clacking of billiard balls could be heard from a pool table as guests at the dive shop prepared for the afternoon dive to Una Una, an active volcano with some of the richest reefs in the region. I met Jemmy, the resident divemaster, and signed up.

Together with nine other divers in an open dive boat, we zipped across the channel to a small village to request permission to dive at Una Una's protected reefs. With permission granted, we headed to a site called The Pinnacle or "Fishomania". When I rolled into the sea, it seemed like I was falling into an overstocked aquarium: Schools of fusiliers and surgeonfish swarmed the reef as we glided through the multi-coloured mix of coral.

Pyramid butterfly fish, eight-banded butterfly fish, six-banded angelfish, regal angelfish, redtoothed triggerfish and dusky chromis joined the party.



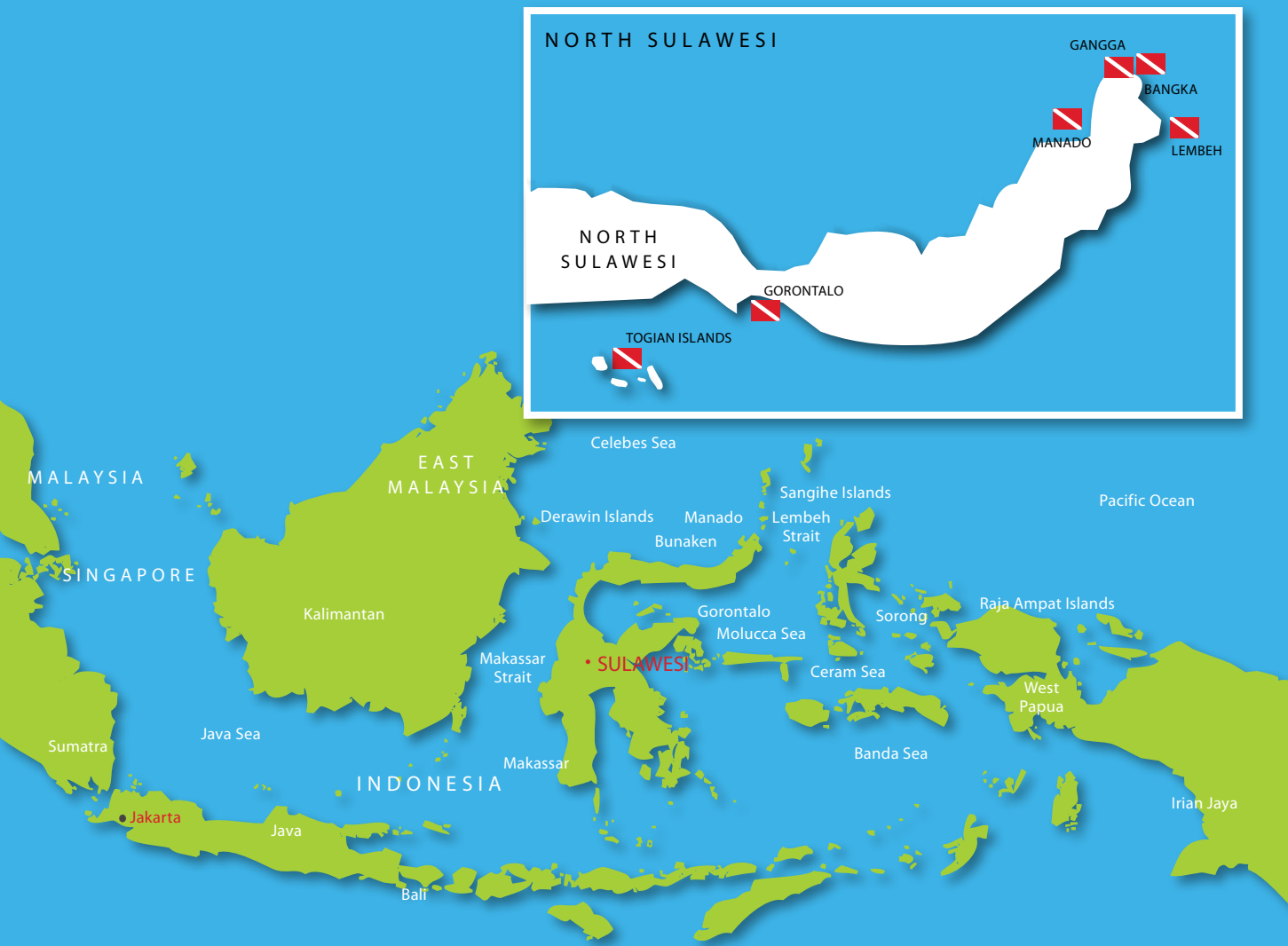
We weaved through the channels and ducked past overhangs to photograph a lone lionfish, a spotted boxfish and a pair of longfin spadefish. We returned to the surface, ecstatic at the quantity and diversity of the sea life we'd seen, then motored on a short distance for a second, equally spectacular dive.

Over the next few days, I dived two to three times a day and was especially charmed by Taipi Wall

and The Gap. These undersea landscapes were covered with colourful barrel sponges, sea fans, yellow sponges and wire corals; and were home to damselfish, harlequin sweetlips, yellow-dash and three-striped fusiliers, and midnight snappers. We even spotted an eagle ray as we swam back to the boat.

On my third and final day, I signed up for the first decompression dive of my life, and the deepest: The Crack (49m). Deep in the blue, we passed large patches of

rare black coral and were followed by a bumphead parrotfish more than a metre long. As I breathed off the spare tank that had been set for our decompression stop, I reflected on the sea life I'd witnessed in the Togians and Maming, the intrepid Bajo who lived off the sea with all his wisdom. **AD**



## getting there

There is no fast, easy way to get to the Togian Islands. It is best to contact the dive resort directly for travel arrangements. The journey begins with a flight to either Manado (SilkAir or Air Asia from Singapore or Kuala Lumpur) or Makassar (Garuda Indonesia or Lion Air from Bali, Kuala Lumpur or Jakarta).

## entry requirement

Contact your local Indonesian Consulate or Embassy for up-to-date information. For some countries, visas are not required, while for others, visas can be applied upon arrival or in advance. A good website to refer to is: [www.eco-divers.com](http://www.eco-divers.com).

## electricity

Electricity: 220V/50Hz  
(Shuko Euro Plug)

## climate

About 30 deg C all year round.

## language

Indonesian. English is also commonly spoken.

## currency

Most resorts accept Indonesian Rupiah, Euros and US dollars (post 1996). Some accept credit cards, but not all.

## accommodation:

Togian Island Retreat  
[www.togianislandretreat.com](http://www.togianislandretreat.com)  
E-mail: [togian\\_islandsylvie@yahoo.com](mailto:togian_islandsylvie@yahoo.com)

Black Marlin Resort  
[www.blackmarlindiving.com](http://www.blackmarlindiving.com)  
E-mail: [info@blackmarlindiving.com](mailto:info@blackmarlindiving.com)

## reference:

- Lonely Planet – Indonesia
- [www.divetheworldindonesia.com](http://www.divetheworldindonesia.com)