

INDONESIA 2014

notes from my travel journal

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The following is a compilation of my journal notes, musings, emails and general correspondence during my visit to Singapore and Indonesia, covering the period from June 5 to July 3, 2014.

June 3 – 6: L.A. > Singapore > Bunaken Isle, Sulawesi

Here's a summary of my first three days of the journey that was sent shortly thereafter as an email to family and friends in the USA. A collection of images is included.

Lunch break at the Raffles Hotel 5 June 2014





Entrance to the Raffles Hotel, Singapore 5 June 2014

After a couple of days of travel and one day entirely lost to the international date line, I have arrived in north Sulawesi. I'm staying on a small island called Bunaken, which apparently has been taken over by divers. The resort I'm at is Living Colours, but is mostly white people from Finland, the home country of the owner, by no small coincidence. I have never seen so many Fins in one place, except in a Japanese fish market. Last night we all had a meet and greet at the bar. I learned that in the Finnish language there is no distinction between male and female; everyone is simply referred to as a "person." Strange, yet very sociable folks, all of whom can speak excellent English. Since I am traveling alone, they feel obliged to look after me, like a stray pet.



Michael, always smiling, Living Colours Resort boat from Manado to Bunaken Island 6 June 2014

Attached are some images I made during my travels thus far. I enjoyed seeing Singapore again, now after some 30 years. It has become quite a fascinating city, that might be compared to Switzerland in terms of the cleanliness and crime-free character. Dogs, for example must be leashed and their droppings removed to plastic bags by their owners. Certain breeds (see the image of a sign below), must be muzzled, along with, I suppose, politically incorrect comedians.

Feeling pretentious, and truly awestruck by the historical implications of British colonialism in the region, I visited the Raffles Hotel, built in 1822. I couldn't afford even the cheapest room there for one night (about \$600), so I settled for the cheapest thing on the menu for lunch (about \$30). It was jolly good having a glass of wine and experiencing the luxury of the 1800's in Singapore. Good thing my high status meant tipping the waiter was unnecessary.

I actually had arrived in Singapore a few minutes after midnight after an unpleasantly bumpy flight from Tokyo. Imagine a six-hour Northridge CA earthquake. Even the flight attendants, normally unshakably composed, looked scared. When I found my hotel in the old district of Little India, the hotel clerk informed me that check in was 2 PM and there were no extra rooms available yet. He kindly (in that dankyou veddy much way of Indians with British accents) called a nearby hotel and booked a room for me so that I wouldn't have to sleep in his hotel lobby until 2 PM. I wheeled my overloaded suitcases down the quiet street, slipping by a bum (also Indian) crashed out on the sidewalk, to Hotel 81, run by a Chinaman, perhaps the only one in the entire district. I never learned why it was 81. The hotel was nearly full, mostly of young lovers coming and going. Good thing I didn't end up in Hotel 69.

I slept soundly in a tiny room without windows, sort of like a sensory deprivation experiment in a psychology lab. Then, at precisely 4:30 AM, I packed up my refrigerated gear, checked out of Hotel 81, and wheeled down the still quiet street to the Sandpiper Hotel, my original destination. A different clerk was there and he graciously took my bags into storage for the day. He even hailed a cab for me and told a slightly confused cab driver how to get to the world renowned Singapore Botanical Gardens, where I planned to spend the better part of the day. SBG opens at 5 AM, presumably so that homeless people like me can go somewhere peaceful and safe 2 hours before dawn. My still cold camera, lenses and binocular had completely fogged up in the balmy, equatorial atmosphere of the park. I kept rubbing the glass with a damp handkerchief, largely in vain. Note to self: When in the tropics, turn off the hotel room air conditioning and use a fan.

SBG turned up about 25 species of bird for my day-list, including Javan Myna, which, I learned later was in top contention for the most common bird in Singapore. Three lakes are found in the garden property, consisting of about 150 acres of plantings, including the world's largest orchid collection, which I somehow managed to overlook. Sometime around 10AM, I fell sound asleep on a park bench, only to be rudely awakened by large drops of water hitting my face from an unannounced tropical thunderstorm. Bewildered, I pulled myself together and made a run for cover, still disoriented (where the hell am I? What day is this?, etc.).



Sign in the Singapore Botanical Garden 5 June 2014



Javan Mynas in the Singapore Botanical Garden 5 June 2014



No pests allowed in Singapore 5 June 2014

June 6 -13, 2014: *Bunaken Island, North Sulawesi, Indonesia*



The author in over his head at Mike's Point, Bunaken Island 8 June 2014 photo by Nils Langstredt

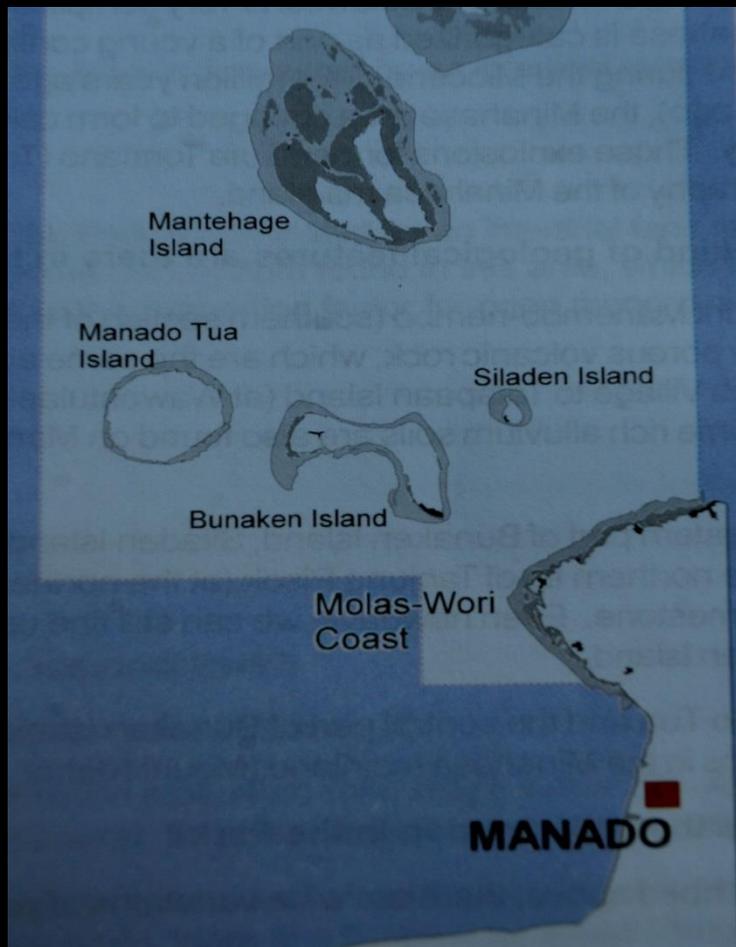
For most of folks staying at the Living Colours resort on Bunaken Island, diving, eating, drinking, socializing and sleeping, were about the only options, and pretty much in that order. Fairly soon I fell into the routine.

Still a bit jet-legged, I took the first day off from diving and began exploring the island on foot. Bunaken didn't look very big on the map compared with the mainland of Sulawesi, about two miles offshore at the nearest point in the south, though with an area of about 1,740 acres, it was more than I could possibly survey in a few days of walking for a couple of hours at a time each morning and evening. So I reasoned that the area (about 50 acres) around the lodge and adjacent village (probably a reasonably accurate sample of the island habitats) should contain, at one time or another, just about all the biodiversity (read, birdlife) the island had to offer. I have no way of actually knowing if that hypothesis was correct. However, after a few days of seeing the same bird species repeatedly, and no new ones added during the last two days, there seemed to be some support for my reasoning.

My first venture away from the resort ran into trouble with the neighbor's dog. Seems I had wandered a little too far down the shore and into its territory. Like the local villagers, it had a surprised look on its face, as if to ask, "Are you lost or something? Shouldn't you be on a dive boat?" I took a detour and headed uphill to circumvent the upset beast, believing I was being watched and followed. Paranoia about strange dogs in strange places, I guess. There was a convenient tree limb cutting that I quickly converted it into a walking stick/dog-deterrent. Somehow, this made me feel invincible. I guess it worked. No sign of the dog after that. I also took some comfort reflecting on the fact that Indonesian dogs were on the menu and they probably knew it; hence they tend to keep a low profile around humans.

*Birdlife was definitely inconspicuous; the most abundant species appeared to be noisy **Slender-billed Crows** and tiny, fast moving **Olive-backed Sunbirds**. Both of those species I had seen in Singapore, and were part of an assemblage of widespread, opportunistic birds, biologist Jared Diamond referred to as "Supertramps."*

Jared Diamond (a UCLA distinguished professor and author of several national best sellers), together with other renowned biologists, e.g. Edward O. Wilson (a Harvard distinguished professor and Pulitzer prize-winning author), discovered that a number of geographical and biological variables were involved in predicting how many species would be on any given island at one time. Some of these variables were, the size of the island (larger islands tend to have more species than smaller islands, ignoring other topographical features), distance to the mainland (islands near a mainland had more species than distant islands), habitat quality (undisturbed forest supported more species than patchy forest), and finally, the dispersal potential of a given species (strong fliers generally get to islands more often than weak fliers). For Bunaken Island, which is comparatively small in area yet close to the mainland (which happens to be a very large island), we could reasonably predict that, all else being equal, there would be a relatively large diversity of birds. However, given the widespread habitat destruction and modification (perhaps as much as 90% of the original lowland rainforest has been removed and or heavily modified by agriculture), Bunaken's bird species diversity would be correspondingly impoverished. Further, it seems likely that there is a high species and individual turnover rate on the island as new arrivals replace local extirpations. Thus, a dynamic balance is struck between local island extinctions and new colonization from the mainland, though species composition may change fairly frequently.



By contrast, the neighboring volcanic island, Manado Tua (see above map), is slightly larger in area (2,570 vs. 1,740 acres) and has apparently retained much of the original rainforest. Interestingly, Manado Tua also has a small population of Crested Macaque, which is otherwise entirely endemic to northern Sulawesi (How did that happen?). According to the island biogeography models proposed by MacArthur, Wilson and Diamond, Manado Tua should support a significantly richer avifauna than Bunaken. Yet, I am unaware of any systematic biological surveys conducted and/or published for Manado Tua Island. Is anyone out there interested in a graduate research project?

Julia and Manado Tua Island volcano in the background 12 June 2014



*Indeed, after about four days, I had probably found 85% of the birds on the island, consisting of just a handful of vagabond birds such as **Striated Heron**, **Collared Kingfisher**, **Sacred Kingfisher**, **Pied Imperial Pigeon**, **Gray-cheeked Green Pigeon** (a lifer for me), **Emerald Dove**, **Moluccan Swiftlet** (a lifer, separated from **Uniform Swift** by the former's light rump), **Glossy Swiftlet**, **White-vented Cuckoo Shrike** (a lifer, and well-named), **Hair-crested Drongo** (neither hair nor crest visible), **Great Eared Nightjar** (a lifer, identified by its distinctive repetitive calls), **Pacific Swallow** (a pair nesting under a resort bungalow) and a small flock of **Javan Munia** in the garden at Lorenzo village. Additionally, I noted about three or four vocalizations from birds I could not locate, possibly representing species not included on my Bunaken Island list. BTW, a "lifer" is a bird one has encountered for the first time. Welcome to the world of birding , alias bird-watching.*

Pied Imperial Pigeon (Ducula bicolor) Bunaken Isle 9 June 2014



Emerald Dove (Chalcophaps indica) 8 June 2014 Bunaken Isle



Gray-cheeked Green Pigeon (Treron griseicauda) Bunaken Isle 9 June 2014



Sacred Kingfisher (Todyramphus sancta) Bunaken Isle 8 June 2014



Pacific Swallow (Hirundo pacifica) Living Colours Resort, Bunaken Isle 8 June 2014



Hair-crested Drongo (Dicurus hottentottus) Bunaken Isle 9 June 2014



Diving around Bunaken and Manado Tua Island was literally breathtaking. Our dives routinely involved a buddy-check for functional SCUBA gear prior to a backward roll off the gunnel. In a few more seconds, we released air from our buoyancy compensator vests and began the initial descent to about 25 feet, usually into a sandy clearing amongst huge coral growths. Swimming to the edge of a sheer cliff (the volcanic base of a sinking island), we dropped an additional 25 to 50 feet. When looking down at this point, nearly everyone who is new to the area experiences an immediate sensation of vertigo. In some places, despite vertical visibility of 100 feet or more, the bottom of the wall disappears into the dark blue abyss. In places, e.g. between Bunaken Island and Manado Tua, the depth is about one mile. Often times, to maintain equilibrium, I had to focus on the wall rather than looking downward during a descent. My deepest dive was to 84 feet but usually we stayed within 60 feet of the surface. Nevertheless, my attention was frequently distracted by looking downward, wondering what strange creatures lurked far below.

Mark Erdmann, a marine biologist visiting Manado, Sulawesi, discovered a Coelacanth caught by local fishermen at Manado Tua island 1998. This was indeed an extraordinary discovery. The only other location for this “living fossil” that we know of is thousands of miles away along the east coast of South Africa.

A living Coelacanth



Source: Wikipedia 2014

Coelacanths, represented by two living species (Latimeria chalumnae and L. menadoensis), belong to a group of fishes known largely by their fossil remains dating to around 120 million years before present. Divers off the east coast of South Africa have observed and photographed Coelacanths at depths of around 300 feet (at least two divers have lost their lives in pursuit of Coelacanths at those depths), and have reported that these fish probably descend to depths of 500-1,200 feet. Here’s a link to a fascinating National Geographic film about Coelacanths:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jl_txxYQEA

Anatomically, it appears the Coelacanth uses its multiple lobe-shaped fins (internal skeletal elements of the pectoral and pelvic fins are homologous with the

tetrapod humerus, radius and ulna) for swimming slowly and maneuvering in and out of caves and crevices. Previously, some anatomists believed (incorrectly) the Coelacanth used its fins for walking on the sea floor. Although much regarding its biology can be deduced from careful anatomical study together with underwater videography and observations, very little about the Coelacanth's natural history is known, such as its reproductive rate and population size. Based on what little information is available, biologists believe that the Coelacanth in the Western Indian Ocean is critically endangered. Even less is known about the Manado Tua species of Coelacanth, prompting the Indonesian government to establish and maintain Bunaken National Park. The presence of a population of Coelacanth in this area adds an exciting new dimension to diving around Bunaken and Manado Tua islands.

Following each dive, I logged the results of my observations. Though many of the life forms gradually became familiar to me, every dive site featured a bewildering array of new species. Most of the other divers were also interested in knowing what we saw; there were some fish identification cards onboard, which were initially helpful, though incomplete. Best of all, I discovered that The Living Colours resort library had a comprehensive and accurate photographic guide to reef fishes of Indonesia (Kuitert, R.H and T. Tono-zuka 2004. Pictorial Guide to Indonesian Reef Fishes. P.T. Dive and Dives Press, Denpasar, Bali; 3 vols. ;893 pp.). The latter reference was essential for identification of fish I observed in Bunaken National Park.

I identified about 120 species of fish, only about 5% of the more than 2,000 species documented in Bunaken National Park. Additionally, I pored over hundreds of images that I made of marine invertebrates, including colorful Sponges (microscopic to gigantic), Cnidarians (e.g. sea anemone, branching, brain and soft corals; sea fan coral), Crustaceans (lobster, tiny reef crabs and candy-stripe shrimp), Molluscs (e.g. giant clam, conus, whelk, a beautiful white nudibranch and one secretive black octopus), Echinoderms (e.g. common blue sea star and chocolate-chip sea star), Tunicates (several colonial forms, including one translucent blue species), Chondrichthyes (e.g. blue-spotted ray), and many Teleosts (bony fish) I could not identify, in some cases even to family. There has

been widespread convergent evolution of body form and coloration among unrelated groups of reef fishes; identification of some species is possible only with excellent quality photos and/or specimens. Below are some of the underwater images I made while diving in Bunaken National Park. Any erroneous identifications are entirely my own.

Map showing locations of dive sites around Bunaken Island



Loading the Living Colours dive boat at low tide 8 June 2014



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Living Colours divers resting between dives 8 June 2014



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Beruntun Wall dive, southeast Bunaken Island 9 June 2014



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Beruntun wall community @ 50 ft. Bunaken Island 9 June 2014



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Anemone Fish Sachiko Pt. @ 47 ft. Bunaken Island 11 June 2014



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Nudibranch Mikes Point @ 53 ft. Bunaken Island 10 June 2014



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