

Captions for 2012 Calendar

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Cover: From “The Arch,” a dive along a volcanic wall. One school of fish heads up along the wall, another heads toward it. When the topography is vertical, gravity seems to operate in a different direction, maybe because slight currents run vertically rather than horizontally. The blue void past the wall gives the feeling of infinity. The dive guides said there is indeed an arch at this site, but it is beyond comfortable depths, so we skipped it.

Feb: Beth floats above a branch of coral black coral on a wall. A surprising amount of black coral grows in this area. Worldwide, most black coral at diveable depths was harvested, for jewelry, before the animal was declared endangered and its trade forbidden. Only the coral’s skeleton is black; the animal itself is green or pinkish.

Mar: A small crab hugs an anemone, at “Biatabang”, a dive site on Hela Island just opposite the resort. Anemones provide shelter and protection for many small creatures; an experienced dive guide with excellent vision and knowledge of natural history can spot them and point them out. This dive site is next to a small village and is named after it. It seemed a little odd to gear up and drop into the underwater world in front of a crowd of watching kids onshore, like stepping through an interdimensional portal next to a schoolyard. After 35 min underwater, my camera began beeping and flashing a red light: the flood alarm. I surfaced without delay and held the camera overhead until the boat picked me up. Later I found just one drop of water inside the camera: in the flood alarm circuit, possibly from condensation.

Apr: School of red anthias at “The Cathedral”, a dive site along the coast of Alor Island across the strait from the resort. The land rises steeply from below 140 feet depth to cliffs above water. Trees grow atop the cliffs and vines dangle. A group of small boys perched on the cliffs, and watched and offered occasional comments, as we prepared for the dive. We dropped onto a steep slope of rubble, then dropped to 90 feet and swam through an elbowed tunnel to reach a vertical wall covered with

bright red and orange soft coral. We noticed these schools of red anthias, reflected by the surface, next to the cliffs at shallow depths at the end of the dive.

May: Anemonefish at “Red Sand Beach”, next to Pura island. The island is an extinct volcano, and some lava flow produced a stream of red sand that falls into the ocean at this point. It is next to a small village. Many of the anemones contained anemonefish, usually all of one species. I believe that these are Pink anemonefish. The guides referred to them as “shawnee” anemonefish because the stripe is like a punk hairdo. Anemonefish are challenging subjects because they respond to a diver by alternately darting toward the diver in aggression, and away in fear.

June: Ribbon eel at the “Pearl Farm.” This site is near a pearl farm, established by an Australian entrepreneur. The farm is a series of low platforms over the water, with a small hut said to contain a guard. It is in a closed inlet, or loch, that runs from Alor Strait toward the town of Kalabahi. The loch nearly splits Alor Island in half. The bottom is black sand and cobbles. Tides and currents are small and many exotic creatures live in the “muck”. This ribbon eel was cooperative, emerging quite far from his burrow and displaying his textured neck and yellow pectoral fins. I liked this shot because his transparent teeth are visible. I am not sure of the function of the flanges on his nostrils. The eel was probably 2 or 3 feet long: he didn’t emerge completely. His head is probably a few inches long.

July: Cowfish at “Ampera,” a dive site on the north bank of the inlet on Alor island, just off the town of Alor Cecil. The “muck” bottom was mostly fist-sized cobbles. The cowfish was an agile swimmer, although not a fast one, and preferred to swim away from me. His tail was curled around next to his body, on his right side. He was about 3 inches long. I have no idea what the horns are for.

Aug: Ghost pipefish at the “Pearl Farm.” Ghost pipefish are fabulously well-camouflaged and it can take a while to spot them among coral branches, even while looking right at them.

Sept: Pink soft coral at “Mandarin slope” on the south side of Pura island. This tiny part of a big coral is an inch or so across. The complicated structures of soft coral help the individuals in the colony feed. The white fibers embedded in the stalks are solid material, and help the colony keep its shape. The dive site takes its name from the Mandarin fish that live there; they are large and bold.

Oct: Anemones and coral at “Anemone City,” a dive site on the south side of Pura Island. This incredible plain is covered with fields of all sorts of anemones, interrupted by stands of hard coral. Creatures of all sorts live among the anemones

and coral. The dive started in a ripping current, which then settled down. Strong tidal currents in the narrow strait bring food and clean water to the corals and anemones. This was among the coolest dive sites: I recorded 74F.

Nov: Transparent shrimp on a large anemone, at the “Pearl Farm”. Such shrimp are fairly common on anemones and coral; the transparency provides some camouflage, and the anemone host protection.

Dec: Rhinopias on muck. Rhinopias are scorpionfish and ambush predators. They rely on camouflage to hide them from their prey. Rhinopias are much prized in the aquarium trade: an individual can fetch \$5000.

Jan: Nudibranch at “Ampera”. This individual was unusually large, about 5 inches long. So far I have not been able to identify it, although it may be a member of the genus *Phyllodesium*, perhaps *Phyllodesium longicirrum*.