

Indonesia: Torajaland's leading attraction used to be death and its elaborate rituals; now it's the diving



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Torajana girls dressed for a funeral ceremony, an occasion of big crowds, strong colour and multiple sacrifices

Flashlight fish and flamboyant funerals

It was pitch black, and I was deep beneath the surface of the sea, yet I could see stars all around. With each kick of my fins the stars swirled into existence, tumbling around me, fading as fast as they had been born.

It was bioluminescence, a natural phenomenon, which causes marine organisms to glow when agitated. I could have stayed for hours watching my movements leave a trail of star dust behind, but there were more pressing matters on my mind.

Forty feet below, the bioluminescence was illuminating the outline of something huge. Killer whales had been spotted only four days earlier. Were they now to pay a night-time visit? Or was the darkness playing tricks with my mind? Perhaps the ominous shadow was just a large shoal of fish

packed close together. I shone my torch down. Nothing showed. It was a shoal of fish, I convinced myself.

The light-show was not composed of bioluminescence alone. Flashlight fish — the underwater equivalent of fireflies — darted in and out of the coral. Then there were our own underwater lights: directed at the reef wall, they illuminated the oranges, reds and whites of the coral gardens. Against this blaze of colour, a football-size black and white lion fish with its ostentatious feather-like display of poison-tip fins, ambled by.

We were diving a site called Lekuan 3. This is one of more than 20 in the Dunaken national marine reserve off Manado on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi. The island is at the centre of the area that marine biologists credit with



the most diverse coral ecosystems in the world. Indonesia accounts for about 15 per cent of the world's reefs. Three thousand species of fish populate the waters, and the diving is world class.

Scuba enthusiasts come to Manado for its wall diving. Just off the shore the reef turns perpendicular and it's a sheer drop to the bottom, hundreds of feet below. Diving a wall is like skydiving in slow motion and in Manado there's lots to look at on the way down.

Colubrine sea snakes, with zebra-crossing bands, are a frequent sight. You'll see them searching the coral crevices like terriers at fox holes, looking for prey. If they bite you're in trouble — the poison is one of the deadliest known to man — but they're not aggressive. Still, one of them gave me a fright when it swam to within 2ft of my face mask.

Like most reefs, the fish dominate. Schools of yellow-backed fusiliers tear back and forth along the walls.

Barracuda hang around in the shallows, often having their teeth picked at by attentive cleaner wrasses. The stupid-looking puffer fish don't so much swim as bumble about, confident that their ability to swell to the size of a balloon will put off the sharks.

You'll often see turtles, a yard long with doleful eyes. On one occasion, Kiki, our skinny Indonesian guide, pointed out a hawksbill paddling by, its shell gleaming in the sun.

For me, the most memorable experience of all came after a dive. I was floating alone on the surface waiting for the boat to pick me up, when I spotted a school of about 33 dolphins 50ft away. I paddled towards them but never made it. Two dolphins broke away and came over to check me out. We were within feet of each other, close enough for each to study the other with intense curiosity on both sides.

Diving has only recently started attracting tourists to Torajaland. Before the underwater life, death was the

island's leading attraction: cemeteries and elaborate funeral ceremonies. If you want a sun, sea and sand holiday, stop reading. If you want to see ceremony, ritual and culture, visit Torajaland.

The funeral ceremonies of Toraja are big events, involving large numbers of people, colour and ritual sacrifice. If the dead are not given a proper send-off, the Toraja believe the spirit will bring misfortune to the family. Ceremonies last for days and start with chanting and singing. They end with young men holding kick-fighting contests, women dressed in black and the air filled with the sound of pigs squealing as they are slaughtered. Tourists are welcome at virtually every aspect of the funeral ceremony: as visitors, they add to the importance of it all.

It is a bizarre place to visit. One morning I was enjoying a light breakfast at a small family-run hotel, when the owner came running. "Come quickly, we're going to kill a buffalo onto the back for my grandmother's funeral," she said.

Only in Torajaland would you be invited by your hotel owner to go and watch a water buffalo having its throat cut. But it was the cemeteries of Toraja which fascinated me most. Until a few years ago,

babies which died within a week of birth were buried in holes carved out of living trees. It is odd standing by a tree knowing it is growing around the body of a dead infant.

For many Toraja adults, their last resting-place is a tomb cut out of a sheer limestone cliff face. The higher the status of the dead, the higher up the cliff they go. Some are buried 200ft up with a wooden door sealing the entrance to the tomb.

Most haunting are the *tua tua*, balconies of wooden effigies of the dead. They stand with outstretched hands in verandas besides the cliff-face tombs. Carved from jackfruit trees, the statues are rarely made nowadays, and then only for high-ranking individuals. They serve two purposes: to guard the tombs and to act as a receptacle for the soul of the dead. They make an eerie sight, dressed in their faded cotton shirts, with their own bags of betel nut, solemnly gazing out across the emerald-green rice terraces.

One Australian tourist was so impressed with the wooden effigies that he commissioned his own *tua tua*. If I'd done the same, I would have chosen miniature scuba gear for my effigy so that my soul could continue diving off Sulawesi.

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'Scuba lovers come here for the wall diving'

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