Bali — the images flash in my mind of majestic volcanoes, traditional architecture, beautiful offerings of flowers, thousands of colourful fishes, shimmering blue waters behind tall forests of soft corals, and secret bays of mysterious critters as yet unknown to science. Resilient to the after-effects of the October 2002 bombing, Kuta now seem fresh, new and vibrant with the latest surf fashion, designer labels and delicate works of art on canvas, wood and stone. It is time to rediscover Bali, the island of the gods and part of the richest reef system of the world.
The wreck celebrates the richness of Indonesia’s marine bio-diversity and the ease of diving at depths between five and 30 metres has a lot to do with its popularity. The most obvious attraction on the wreck is the sheer number and variety of fish; friendly fishes that approach up close and personal. Sergeant-major damselfish, Crescent wrasse and unicornfish often swim right up to divers, to enquire for a free feed. The bigger fishes, Humphead parrotfish, Oriental sweetlips, rabbitfish, Coral trout and groupers sometimes hover in mid-water making great subjects for fish portraits. Though only a few table-sized hard corals are found on the outer edge, the superstructure is heavily colonised with soft corals, gorgonian fans and tall black and green coral trees, stinging hydrozoans and colourful sponges. The Liberty’s gun is still intact on the stern at 28 metres, completely encrusted with sessile animals and sea fans.

At 30 metres the reef is prolific with red sea whips, huge barrel sponges, huge sea fans, wandering mantis shrimp and more; an underwater photographer’s paradise.

On this trip with Queen of the Sea, I celebrated my 15th anniversary dive on the Liberty, the first was in 1989. I was delighted to find that the school of Big-eyed jacks have grown; they now have split into respective schools of large adults and young adults.

Ironically, the Liberty’s fame overshadows the rest of the natural marvels that can be found at Tulamben, all unique to this bay; a bay of striking contrasts.
ruggedness, of hydrographic culture, of rich biodiversity and of tranquility. On the eastern end of Tulamben bay, beneath the temple, a wall plunges from near the surface to beyond 60 metres. This is the icon of wall diving. The wall is completely occupied with huge barrel sponges, coral trees, oversized gorgonian fans — one prominently positioned on a ledge at 30 metres is more than three metres high and adorned with Long-nosed hawkfish and canary yellow damselfish.

Within numerous caverns and crevices are Thorny oysters, Tubastraea corals, crabs and shrimps sharing homes with squatfish, Coral trout, blennies and scorpionfish. Among fish experts, this wall is notoriously famous for harbouring hard to find and hard to photograph species including the Comet (Calloplesiops altivelis), a fish with elaborate finnage and a false eyespot. Sunfish (Mola Mola), Hammerhead sharks and Whale sharks have all been sighted off this site. A night dive is a must for a surrealistic experience. Descend to 30 metres, face the wall, switch off the torch and watch. Millions of tiny green bulbs magically appear to perform a show of twinkling zig-zagging lights. These are the Anomalops, the fish of the night that possess a bioluminescent organ beneath each eye. Sometimes, unexpectedly, one will stumble upon a gold mine and, if you are shortsighted, and I mean literally, you may even miss the opportunity. It was timely for us to visit Patrick Swartz, a Swiss expat who has set up a small diving resort with his wife some three kilometres from Tulamben Bay. Patrick, who is also a PADI instructor, thought nothing much of the seemingly mundane black sand slope right on his doorstep. So, for the past year or so he has only dived with his guests and divemaster at the drop-off wall and wreck at Tulamben Bay, 10 minutes away from his beach-front property. Two months ago his divemaster, Christiane Waldrich, decided that 10 minutes to the dive sites is a pretty big inconvenience in life. One afternoon, armed with her tiny camera, she walked off the coarse sand beach to discover a heaven of critters, odd-balls and some extravagant varieties of nudibranch. On my first dive, I blew off 132 frames, equivalent to 3.6 rolls of film in just 30 minutes. This new hot-spot of critters is without a doubt among the best in the world, matching sites of Lembeh Strait and Milne Bay in Papua New Guinea. Christiane’s portfolio of nudibranch and flatworms is impressive; there must be over 300 species and many of them unidentified. From one afternoon dive, I recorded 41 species, beating a personal record of 28 off Nudi Fall at Lembeh Strait. Minuscule orange and yellow frogfish are not uncommon, but one with transparent polka dot dorsal fins is a species that has yet to be published in any identification books and is not known to Dr Gerry Allen, one of the world’s best ichthyologists. Of course, there are the usual suspects — Ghost pipefish, Bobbit worms, Boxer crabs, octopus, Ornamental squid, sand divers, frogfishes, stonefish, sand eels, sand anemones, tons and tons of strange crabs, shrimps, worms and I was fascinated to photograph one of the most exquisite psychedelic coloured Tiger shrimp (Phyllognathia ceratophthalma).

I was so impressed with this hot-spot, which we now call Seraya Secrets, named for Patrick Swartz’s resort, that of course I stayed to continue diving there for the next three days, abruptly putting an end to the live-aboard trip and my intention to circumnavigate the island of Bali. I am sure news will travel fast through cyberspace and hundreds of macro enthusiasts will land on Patrick’s doorstep in a flash to discover the critters of Seraya Secrets.

As I have learnt, Bali remains predictable — the island oozes with enchanting culture, the people are the most charming within a fabric of diverse culture in a country of 190 million, and the sea predictably promises surprise after surprise.