



AWAKENING OF THE SENSES

Gili Trawangan is not just about having fun in the sun. Join Mallika Naguran as she dives deeper into this island's underwater garden for a spot of coral reef restoration

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MADE Astawa looks out into the azure distance as the speedboat bumps along surges of waves, heading towards the spectre of an island on the clear horizon he knows too well. He has just left Bali with a group of scuba divers that include myself, mostly from Singapore, to learn to care for coral reefs on Gili Trawangan, or fondly known as Gili T for short.

For Made, Gili T is home, where he was born and raised, where he attended high school before leaving for Bali to become a dive instructor. The 17-year-old lad is my guest on this eco dive trip on his own home island – a welcome break from the strenuous instructor training he has been having on Bali the last six months. He is thinking about granny's freshly pounded chilli sambal with coconut flavoured steamed rice and crispy anchovies. He has his meals out near south Gili T beach, while looking out at the tip of Mount Rinjani on Lombok Island not too far away. His mother lives on Lombok, and so do his sisters, but his home is in Gili T where he must return one day after he obtains his professional instructor diving certification to earn his living.

At seven square kilometres, Gili T is the largest of the three Gilis – the other two are Gili Air and Gili Meno – all cast in a row to the northwest of Lombok. Gili means “small island” in Sasak, a language spoken by the early inhabitants of Lombok belonging to the Bali-Sasak-Sumbawa subgroup. The sasaks embraced Islam in the late 17th and 18th century while Hinduism remains intrinsic to most of the other natives within the West Nusa Tenggara province. More than three million Sasak and Balinese live in this area, which includes the Sumbawa island, where Made's father works as a mechanic.

The Gilis are quick getaways for Bali expats who are bored with what picturesque Bali offers and now seek alternative scenery. Gili T, just over an hour's speedboat ride from Bali's Benoa or Padangbai departure point, is the “party island” while Gili Air and Gili Meno

provide quieter escapades in comparison.

Outlining Gili T are gleaming stretches of sandy beaches, fringed by coral reefs and deep fishing zones, where fishermen carry on a livelihood practised by past generations. Following the urgent call of the mosque before dawn and whispered prayers over woven mats, the men row out to the seas with rods and nets on their handmade sampans or wooden boats.

The largely Muslim community living in villages tucked away from the coastline is a framed picture of serenity. Time moves slowly. Sun-kissed kids spill out the back lanes barefoot with tangled hair, old ladies shuffle along with rattan baskets of homemade cakes, and granddads sit out on front verandahs shaded by jackfruit trees, exhaling clove-scented curls.

Here is an island that has no tarmac or runway strip, so motorised vehicles are nowhere to be seen. Instead, bicycles compete with pony carts on a ten-foot squiggly pathway that holds mud when it rains. It fringes the beach and is where one walks on to get food, clothes or for the tourists, to the next bar on a Full Moon party, which interestingly now happens nearly everyday. ►

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Gili T's azure crystal waters and pristine white sand beaches; village kids frolic, carelessly, in the waters; you'll find no motorised vehicles on Gili T, only ponycarts as the main mode of transportation; goofing around underwater; Gili T's beachfront bungalows and long stretches of white sand make it hard to ever leave; in Gili T anything and anywhere can be your playground; though tourism is picking up, fishing still remains the main source of livelihood for villagers; for something romantic, try horseback riding at sunset

Idyllic? Yes. An oasis of calm? If you head inland and up north. A place to meet new friends? For sure. Bars are aplenty, with local tanned dudes carbon copying the Bali cowboys ever ready to befriend single female travellers. They strike awe with their break-dance routines in front of an Irish bar, hoping for a reward in the form of a beer. Partying hard is what most tourists do after a sunny day out diving or island hopping; dehydration quickens beer guzzling, and by four in the morning, the dizzy dances continue to the pounding base and rhythm in one big blur, more often than not aided by easily obtainable party enhancers.

For many who make it out to Gili T, it's a different kind of wild creatures that are the attraction. Under the sea teem varied marine life one can easily recognise: parrotfishes, angelfishes, jacks, puffers, and clownfishes live in symbiotic existence with the animated anemones.

Corals are pretty at a number of dive sites but cannot be compared to the past; the resplendent coral reefs fringing the Gilis have been bombed out due to damaging fishing practices. Communities of fishermen, in their haste to increase their catch, dynamited the spots where fishes congregated most – the coral reefs – and then conveniently swooped up the fish floating dead on the water surface at one go. Little did they know that they were destroying generations of natural underwater habitat. With the destruction of the coral reefs, the population of coral fishes plunged as a result. The fishermen found themselves with fewer and fewer fish, and then eventually close to none.

While the locals on Gili T recognise their growing economic needs and want to grow tourism in a bigger way to meet those needs, it is heartening to know that they now take personal responsibility in protecting their environment.

A community-led movement – the Gili Eco Trust – was formed in 2001 by seven dive shops and a local organisation to gather funds and resources to heighten marine awareness and conservation of the three Gili islands. A major initiative is to restore demolished underwater habitats and prevent further beach erosion by building new coral reefs using electric

powered structures or Biorock with the help of the community itself.

Other initiatives include installing mooring buoys to prevent accidental anchoring on coral reefs, increased marine police patrol to curb bad fishing practices, waste management to prevent pollution, plastic bag reduction awareness programmes, and education of children and youths. Today there are more than 500 hotels, resorts, lodges, dive centres and tour operators on all three islands, with 50 businesses contributing actively to the trust fund and to the upkeep of the island, which includes training youths for the bustling tourism industry.

One of the few selected Indonesians to be fully sponsored by PADI, a scuba diving association, to become a certified instructor, Made hopes to do his bit to reverse the devastating actions of the fishermen by participating in coral reef restoration through the Biorock dive course program.

“I want to help improve the environment with Gili Eco Trust, especially the marine problems we face, after I become a dive instructor,” he says. Hopefully it will be a dream come true for this brown-eyed islander in the months to come. 📍

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Biorock technology relies on electric currents running through steel structures to develop corals, and in turn regenerate a whole coral habitat; all divers in Gili T help fund the Gili Eco Trust with a one-off diving levy; with plentiful and varied marine life, Gili T is a superb dive destination

