Indonesia, the land of the many

I’ll be honest: I am extremely biased about Indonesia. I have worked for several years in this dive paradise so I had lots of time to go and explore a certain amount of the 17.500 islands in this country.

To start with, Indonesia lies in the coral triangle. The Pacific Ocean comes from the east, bringing it’s warm water. The Indian Ocean touches the west side with its colder waters. Because of these two oceans, there is a big change of nutrients and water making it very good for corals to grow and fish to flow.   
On the other hand, it can also deliver strong currents. Depending on where you go, you should be aware that bringing a reef hook maybe isn’t a bad idea…

Indonesia is big! It will take some time to get where you need to be. Make sure you plan good in advance. The domestic flights aren’t always on time (ahum ahum). Try to avoid Surabaya airport (delays) and Lion Air/Wings air (delays and a weird transit system). Pay some more money and fly Garuda.

Indonesia is the biggest Muslim country in the world. You won’t notice in Bali but if you go diving somewhere else, check the dates for Ramadhan. The dive regime is changed or diving is suspended for a day.   
If you go diving in Bali, be aware of Nyepi. No diving, no sound, no anything is allowed that day!

Lombok

Lombok has two dive areas: The South with its famous site ‘The Magnet’ and then the Southwest around Sekotong. They are both very different!

Let’s start with the South! ‘The Magnet’ is a world-famous dive pinnacle for spotting hammerhead sharks. They aren’t there the whole time of the year, sadly enough, but come from July till November. If none of these beauties are around, there is still a big chance to spot some white tip reef sharks or mobulas.  
Be aware: this is not a spot for baby divers. There can be really strong down currents and a massive swell that throws you against the pinnacle! People have died or have come up with bruises and scratches all over. Therefore, not everybody is allowed to go. If you don’t have at least 100 dives and a deep certification, you can’t come. Check before booking your trip.

Most of the times ‘The Magnet’ is a combined day trip with ‘The Cathedral’, another pinnacle that is lots safer. From friends, I heard ‘The Cathedral’ is sometimes overfull with banded and olive sea snakes…

There are not many dive centres that go on these trips. Last I heard (end 2016), only Two Fish went it for sure. If you would be around, diving on the Gilis or Southwest Lombok, ask your local dive center to help you out. Trips must be booked in advanced.

The other diving area on Lombok is around Sekotong and all the little islands around, like Gili Gede and Gili Asahan. This is completely different diving! You come to this area for the macro and muck diving. I found tons of different nudibranchs and seahorses, harlequin shrimps and bamboo sharks. Compared to the close by Gili Trawangan, Air and Meno, the water is less clear: Visibility goes from 5m/16ft till 15m/50ft. Water temperatures are the same though, reaching from 26C/79F till 30C/86F.

Lately, with tourism more booming in Lombok, there are more and more dive centers. Some are on the mainland, like Odyssea Divers and Two fish, others are starting on Gili Gede and Gili Asahan.

If you are staying in Sengiggi, you’ll find dozens of dive centers too. They all go diving around the Gili Islands, so if you’re on a real diving trip, go and stay over there instead.

Be aware that Lombok is muslim so the island will celebrate Ramadhan and Idul Fitri. Dive times will change because of those holy days. Check the dates before you go! They are different every year.

Komodo

Everybody has heard about the fiery Komodo dragons and would like to go and see them. As divers, we are lucky, as Komodo is not only a fairy-tale place with its monstrous creatures, but also a divers paradise! And… if you’re visiting the Komodo National Park on a liveaboard, you’ll probably have the chance to see both.

First: if you want to dive the Komodo NP, you fly to Labuan Bajo, Flores and not to the Komodo island itself. All boats leave from there, dayboats and liveaboards.   
As the park is really big, I don’t recommend doing daytrips. You can, but you will be driving for hours until you are where you want to be. It is much nicer to spend some time on a liveaboard, where you go into the park for multiple days and nights. In the evening, you go and enjoy beautiful sunsets on the inhabited islands before the voluntary night dive. In the early morning, you wake up for a sunrise dive and the big breakfast afterwards, followed by more dives and more food. Like this, you can do up to 4 dives a day. Not bad for its price!

Komodo has great dive sites with lots of stuff to see: it has plenty of pelagics. There are lots of mantas, white, black and grey tip reef sharks and the occasional dolphin (We had some humpback whales to while being there! I just don’t think they are that common). On the other hand, you can go and spot some nice nudibranchs and big schools of fish too.

Komodo is suited for all types of divers, and courses are given, but be aware of the currents. They can be fast and go up or down before you realise, so stay behind the guide and bring an SMB and reef hook.  
If you love currents, go with the Current Junkies. They are spot on time when currents will be strong but safe and you`ll see tons of mantas or sharks. They are not suited for open water divers. You do need to have enough of experience to join their precious boat.

If you want it more relaxed, check out the normal liveaboards. Still currents can always be around so be aware. My choice of liveaboard is Wicked Diving. They have a boat that goes around the park for 3 or 6 days (Jaya) and one that is used as a floating hotel so you can stay as long if you like (CB). Other good dive centres are Blue Marlin or Divine Diving. Choose a good and safe dive centre. I have heard bad stories about some day dive centres.

You can dive in Komodo the whole year round, but lots of liveaboards tend to go to Raja Ampat from November till April. This means that between April and October there is more choice in choosing a good boat…

Raja Ampat, West-Papua

Raja Ampat, or Four Kings in Indonesian, is an area in West-Papua. As the name says, it consists of four big islands with lots of smaller ones around. Raja used to be a dive paradise for the people that wanted to spend time and money to get there and stay there. Lately, you can go for cheap(er) and day dives are planned with the more and more homestays build on the islands. All kind of tourists and companies find their way to this superior place so try to enjoy while you still can! The mass tourism became already this bad that in beginning 2017 the cruise ship MS Caledonian Sky from Noble Caledonia Cruises simply rammed a reef and the captain couldn’t care less!

As the local people of Papua know they are living in a very important environmental place, they try to protect it as much as they can and every tourist must pay a Marine Park Entry Permit. Part of this money is used to protect the reefs and catch illegal fishing ships. The last years, the amount was 1.000.000 IDR and the permit counts for 1 year.

Most divers go on liveaboards. You fly to Sorong, West-Papua and you’ll be picked up by your diving company. Depending on the time of the year and the direction of the wind, you’ll go to the North (Wayag islands!) or the South (Missool!). You can’t do both, as sad as it is… It is to far away…  
Whichever direction you will go, you will still dive the Dampier Strait. Water comes from a nutrient rich deep ocean up to the very shallow strait, bringing thousands of fish (fusiliers, tuna, barracuda, sharks), whales and dolphins. The diving is amazing but be aware of the currents!

Because of the booming tourism, more and more homestays are built on the islands close to Waisai, the Raja Ampat Capital on Waigeo island. To get there, you take the ferry from Sorong to Waisai. There you’ll be picked up by boat or car, depending on the place of your homestay. Your day dives will be around the Dampier strait. Maybe, if you are lucky, they’ll bring you as far as Arborek Island so you can dive Manta Sandy.

Raja is still not that cheap and you still need to take your time to get there and away. In high season, you also need to book far in advance to get a spot on the boat or a room in the homestays. Bring what you need from Sorong (alcohol, candy, medicine) because you won’t find it on the islands.   
The homestays are open the whole year through. Liveaboards are more around from September till April as they change with the Komodo high season (April-September).

Lembeh Strait, North-Sulawesi

When my students asked me which place in the world I liked best for diving, then the Lembeh Strait always came up as a 5\* for muck and macro diving. I simply love this place! Though I can understand that people who don’t have an appetite for the small critters, will feel bored as hell as there is no big stuff to be found.   
No, Lembeh is home to a very special fauna and flora with lots of endemic species and other tiny animals, all to be found on the slower than slow diving over black lava sand. Pygmy seahorses, hairy frogfish, mandarinfish, velvetfish, mimic octopus, wonderpus, flamboyant cuttlefish, bobtail squid, ghostpipe fish, … I can keep on naming all the fantastic cuties I saw but then I would be busy for another half an hour! You need to go and check for yourself. You’ll be amazed!

Of course, Lembeh is a great place for avid photographers. Please, be aware of your surroundings and the other divers when taking pictures. Not only is it very impolite and selfish to not let other divers take a picture too, but it is also very easy to destroy the area and even dangerous when you don’t look out and put yourself on the common poisonous fish. Everyone will need to watch a small video, sign a form and then keep themselves to behaving ok. The frog kick is -of course- the recommended way of diving.

As Lembeh is all about muck diving, there is no necessity to go deep. Lots is found in the above 25-30m/80-100ft. There is also no current and water temperatures are warm. If allowed, you can spend more than an hour on every site.

When going to Lembeh, you fly to Manado on North-Sulawesi. Most of the dive centers will come to pick you up and bring you to Bitung by car. From there on, you will be brought by boat to the chosen dive resort. We dove with Two Fish and I enjoyed it lots!

Some Lembeh dive centers (like Two Fish or Froggies Divers) have another dive center in Bunaken, an island closer to Manado. If you decide to dive both, there will be package deals available.

Bunaken

Truth to be told, I have never been to Bunaken. The reason why this place shows on the list, is that Bunaken is lots of times combined with the Lembeh Strait. Some dive centers, like Two Fish and Froggies Divers, have accommodation in both places and give out package deals.  
The reason why this combination is made often, is because of the opposite in fauna and flora. The muck diving happens in Lembeh, the bigger stuff you find in Bunaken.

Bunaken is an island on North-Sulawesi. You fly to Manado and there you will be picked up by your dive center.

Other

Indonesia has more than 17.500 islands. There are lots more dive areas than summed up in the list before. These are some lesser known areas:

Wakatobi, South-Sulawesi

Bira, South-Sulawesi

Togean islands, North-Sulawesi

Liveaboards around Ambon

Cenderawasih bay, West-papua (whale sharks!!!)