



Nestled among the beautiful mangrove trees in North Sulawesi's Manado, Thalassa Dive Center is a Dutch operated and managed 5-Star Instructor Development Center in the plush Hotel Santika. According to manager Simone Gerritsen, many of the staff who joined when she first opened the centre ten years ago are still working with her today.

From the moment she met our boat, we felt we were talking to an old friend. Thalassa's slogan "Come as a guest leave as friend" rang true as we were made to feel at home right away, and were immediately drawn into the group of divers already there.

Thalassa Dive Center sits at the end of a 500-metre-long jetty that runs directly through the mangrove trees and lets guests and staff travel even on the lowest tide. It also makes for a magical walk down to the awaiting dive and day-trip boats.

Diving Friends and Guests

By Jez Tryner



Thalassa offers trips to every corner of North Sulawesi, and Simone assured us they are very flexible and would be glad to take us wherever we wanted to go. Groups are kept small, with each accompanied by a highly-experienced local dive guide, giving guests a unique and personalised experience.

The diving around Manado is mainly sheer walls dropping down to awesome depths. As there is no continental shelf in North Sulawesi, the walls in coastal areas drop down hundreds of metres, making for some breathtaking blue-water wall diving. The abundance and variety of hard and soft corals on top of the walls is unbelievable — not to mention what's there when you peer over the edge!

But if you think the local diving is just walls, walls, and more walls, you're mistaken. Thalassa Dive Center can also arrange for two-day-one-night trips to the Lembeh Strait, with accommodation on the boat thrown in. Lembeh has a world-class selection of critter diving sites for visitors to explore.

Above: The pool at Santika Hotel has a special deep section that's ideal for diver training.

Top Left: Pygmy seahorse (*Hippocampus pontohi*) measuring only 8 mm — definitely one of the world's most uncooperative photographic subjects!

Left: A diver swimming behind a colourful display of corals covering one of Bunaken's stunning walls

We were astounded by the sheer variety of life sustained by the nutrient rich waters in North Sulawesi — pygmy seahorses, mandarinfish, leaf scorpionfish, robust and ornate ghost pipefish and swirling schools of snapper, barracuda and jacks. On wall dives, it took effort to keep up with the guides, who continually pointed out interesting animals. Sharks patrolled the dropoffs, and turtles virtually crowded the camera frame. To be honest, I was clicking my shutter like a madman, hoping I was getting the shots right.

Climbing back on the boat, we were greeted each time with a hot towel and drinks, and our tanks were changed by experienced and helpful crew — my idea of how diving should be. Even my camera enjoyed VIP treatment in its own freshwater rinse tank, with careful handling by the crew.

Thalassa has all the ingredients for good diving — fast, comfortable boats that return to shore between dives, well-trained crew and professional service, an excellent selection of restaurants, natural surroundings and luxurious rooms offered by Hotel Santika.

Thalassa offers trips to sites around Manado, Bunaken National Park, Lembeh and the lesser-known Bangka Island to the north — all the top spots in North Sulawesi. It's customised diving at its best. 🐬

Top Right: A juvenile harlequin sweetlips (*Plectorhynchus chaetodonoides*) wiggling its way around Barracuda Reef in Bunaken

Right: A green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) checking out the camera before going up to the surface for air



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