

Haven in Gili Trawangan & above and below the water...



After several months of intense diving all over Indonesia, the final leg of my journey was intended as a rest; I would stop by Gili for some quiet time on the beach, to lie by the pool, and maybe, if I felt like it, go for a dive or two. Vila Almarik, where I stayed, was an excellent choice for these aspirations. Almarik is further down on the quieter side of the Trawangan beach, set apart from the myriad of backpacker bars and hostels. The hotel is stunning; the garden paths between all the facilities are covered in pink and white bougainvillea, the rooms are spacious and immaculate, the dark-tiled waterfall pool is the perfect place to relax, and the hotel's Italian restaurant serves exceptional food. After the complimentary massage on arrival and some face time with a deck chair and a cocktail, I began to look to sea again.

Gili was not high up on my Indonesian dive itinerary, and for this reason I was genuinely surprised at how stunning the surrounding reefs were. Villa Almarik's dive center Gangga Divers has long since intuited that the coral reefs around here are more pristine down a little deeper than most of the well established local dive sites. For this reason they often do Nitrox specials (all Nitrox was free when I was there), have a constant flow of PADI courses & specialties (i.e. Advanced, Deep Specialty etc) available, and take very small groups (maximum 4 divers per guide). Their boats are well built and custom made for comfortable dive charters, with a spacious undercover section as well as a roof/sundeck (there are never more than 8 guests on the dive boat at any one time). And best of all, all dive gear is handed over to

staff where it is set up, cleaned and rinsed for every dive, then returned dry to your door just before checkout. Towels, fruit and hot tea are provided after every dive and the crew are helpful, professional, and above all extremely knowledgeable about the surrounding underwater area. I ended up spending far more time underwater than I intended and am very glad I did...



There is an enormous profusion of fish life around Gili, the coral bommies I dived were covered in anthias and glassfish. And on the white sandy slopes in between all kinds of creatures can be found hiding in the rubble, from octopus to morays, jawfish to mantis shrimp. The Gilis are also famed for their turtle population, and on several dives I encountered at least a dozen (both green and hawksbill) feeding intently in the shallows. Frogfish and leaf fish are harder to spot, but can be found on glassfish-shrouded coral bommies, along with several species of lionfish. Banded sea snakes dart over the reefs, and pygmy seahorse hide on fans swaying in the currents. The deep pinnacles and reef were flourishing with healthy coral.



The night dives are also well worth making the effort – in the slopes around the island just after dark I came across sleeping turtles tucked into ledges, cuttlefish, decorator crabs, spider crabs, sleeping parrotfish, cowries, and to my utter delight and astonishment, a group of 5 huge Spanish Dancer nudibranchs resting on the reef flat. The dive sites were a short 10 minutes drive away, and we were back in the hotel by dinner time.

The diving was world class, and the hospitality of Villa Almarik was like nothing else that could be found in the Gili Islands. Too often overlooked on the divers itinerary, Gili proved to be an unexpected divers delight. For more information visit www.almarik-lombok.com.



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