



## **Bali and Timor-Leste**

**October 11 2024 – November 6 2024**

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## Introduction

This trip was a trip like no other. Never before did I put so much effort into taking a picture. 2016 in Svalbard was the first time I ever saw a Blue Whale, but as with pretty much every other whale I saw, I found the experience a bit disappointing, because usually only a part of the whale is visible with the water hiding in fact most of the animal. But when would you ever get the opportunity to see a Blue Whale under water? That seemed impossible to me unless you just happened to be very lucky.

Then in 2019 I saw a video of one underwater. After some searching I found out it was taken in Timor-Leste and a bit later I was on the Instapage of Aquatica Dive Resort looking at pictures and videos of Blue Whales. This seemed like more than just a happy coincidence! Desmond Lee, the owner of the dive resort, confirmed as much. I decided to keep this place in mind and was thinking of ways I could get there. However for actually getting a good picture I would need a lot of equipment I didn't yet have.

Then Covid hit and spending money on trips was suddenly not a thing anymore. Now seemed as good a time as any to buy that under water gear! So I bought an underwater housing. I was also chatting to Desmond about possibilities of getting to Timor, but Covid prevented that as well. 2021 seemed to offer a better outlook so tentatively we made the plan that I was going to come to Timor for a few weeks in October and November. I decided to leave nothing to chance and go to Tenerife for two weeks to learn freediving. This way I would be more comfortable getting under water with a Blue Whale on breath hold (because yes: you don't mix scuba and whales!). All was set to go, but flights to Timor were just happening. So I went to Bolivia and Ecuador instead. The trip report is on this website as well.

Fast forward and 2024 was the first year I was able to go again to Timor in the right time of the year. However looking at Blue Whales with Desmond in Timor-Leste had gotten much more popular so it was not easy to arrange as many boat rides as I wanted. It seemed like this year might not go again, but then we found a solution. I was able to book a part of my stay through Big Fish Expeditions and the rest directly with Desmond. The mission was a go!

I spent a couple of days on Bali first, after which I took a flight to Timor-Leste. Finding Blue Whales was the first challenge, but we managed to find one on my second day. Not bad! Then taking pictures: that part was harder than I thought it would be! What I mostly remember from my first drop in the water with a Blue Whale was a huge back rising up from the water which gave the impression a whale was going to run right over my or give me at least a very close brush. All I needed to do was put my head in the water? Not so! It turned out that even the largest animal on the planet needs to be very close for good visibility.

Over the next days I struggled to get into the right position. This was much harder than I had thought it would be! However after some tips from Desmond I changed the way I was swimming and holding my camera and suddenly I was going much faster. I also finally understood how the whales were moving through the water and being at the right place at the right time didn't seem hard anymore. In fact I got to a point where I would just take a big breath and dive down as soon as I got the signal from Desmond and find the whale on my way down. This eventually resulted in some breathtaking sightings.

Blue Whales look much prettier than I thought they would under water. They have these iridescent spots on their back which give the impression of stars. While they look dark grey above the surface, under water they look in fact blue. It's an experience I will forever cherish.

I did not see a great number of species, but the quality of sightings made up for that. I was also very pleased with my sighting of Dugong. Furthermore, the dolphins were always enjoyable and we had sightings pretty much every day. For more background story and more pictures I refer to the links below:

- Watching birds (and some mammals) on Bali: click [here](#).
- On eye-level with a Blue Whale: click [here](#).
- Diving with a Dugong: click [here](#).

## Schedule

<b>October 11</b>	Departure from Amsterdam
<b>October 12</b>	Arrival on Bali
<b>October 13</b>	Day in Denpasar
<b>October 14 – 16</b>	Out with Birding Bali. We used the first day to drive to the surroundings of Bali Barat National Park. Second day we mostly spend in that area and on the third day we slowly made our way back across the island while checking out birding places.
<b>October 17</b>	Transfer Bali - Dili
<b>October 18 - 25</b>	Out looking for Blue Whales
<b>October 26</b>	Spent the morning birding with a local birder in the mountains close to Dili
<b>October 27 - 31</b>	Out looking for Blue Whales
<b>November 1<sup>st</sup></b>	Scuba diving. One dive in a site with a lot of coral and sea anemones. The other one in the site of Dugong Debbie
<b>November 2<sup>nd</sup></b>	Birding places within walking and taxi drive distance of my hotel
<b>November 3<sup>rd</sup></b>	Scuba diving at the place of Dugong Sandy
<b>November 4<sup>th</sup></b>	A day of resting out of necessity, did a little bit of birding
<b>November 5 – 6</b>	Flights Dili – Bali – Dubai - Amsterdam

## List of observed species

### Bali

1. **Bat sp. :** on my first night I was taking pictures of swiftlets on Denpasar beach when some bats also started hunting insects. I was able to take relatively good pictures of them flying around. I haven't found out what species it was. I'm sure it will be a common one. Does anyone have suggestions?







- 2. Horsfield's Treeshrew (*Tupaia javanica*):** seen in different places. Doesn't seem to be a hard one to get. Saw two from a bird hide, one by chance and the other one clearly went for the put out food. This was a hide near Bali Barat National Park (here: -8.1683, 114.4830). The other one was just running around the trees in a forest near Tamblingan Lake (here: -8.2623, 115.1023).





3. **Plantain Squirrel (*Callosciurus notatus*):** very common. Seen in both the forest and urban areas.



4. **Long-tailed Macaque (*Macaca fascicularis*):** very easy to see along the roads near Bali Barat National Park. For example here: -8.2424, 114.4706.





5. **Javan Langur (*Presbytis comata*):** I had one group hanging out in the trees near the feeding area of the Bali Starlings in Bali Barat National Park at dusk while I was there (here: -8.1904, 114.4415). Not sure how easy they are to see. I only saw them one time, but that was also the only time I was there.





6. **Southern Red Muntjac (*Muntiacus muntjak*):** One was feeding around the cage of the captive Bali Starlings at dusk (here: -8.1904, 114.4409).



## Timor-Leste

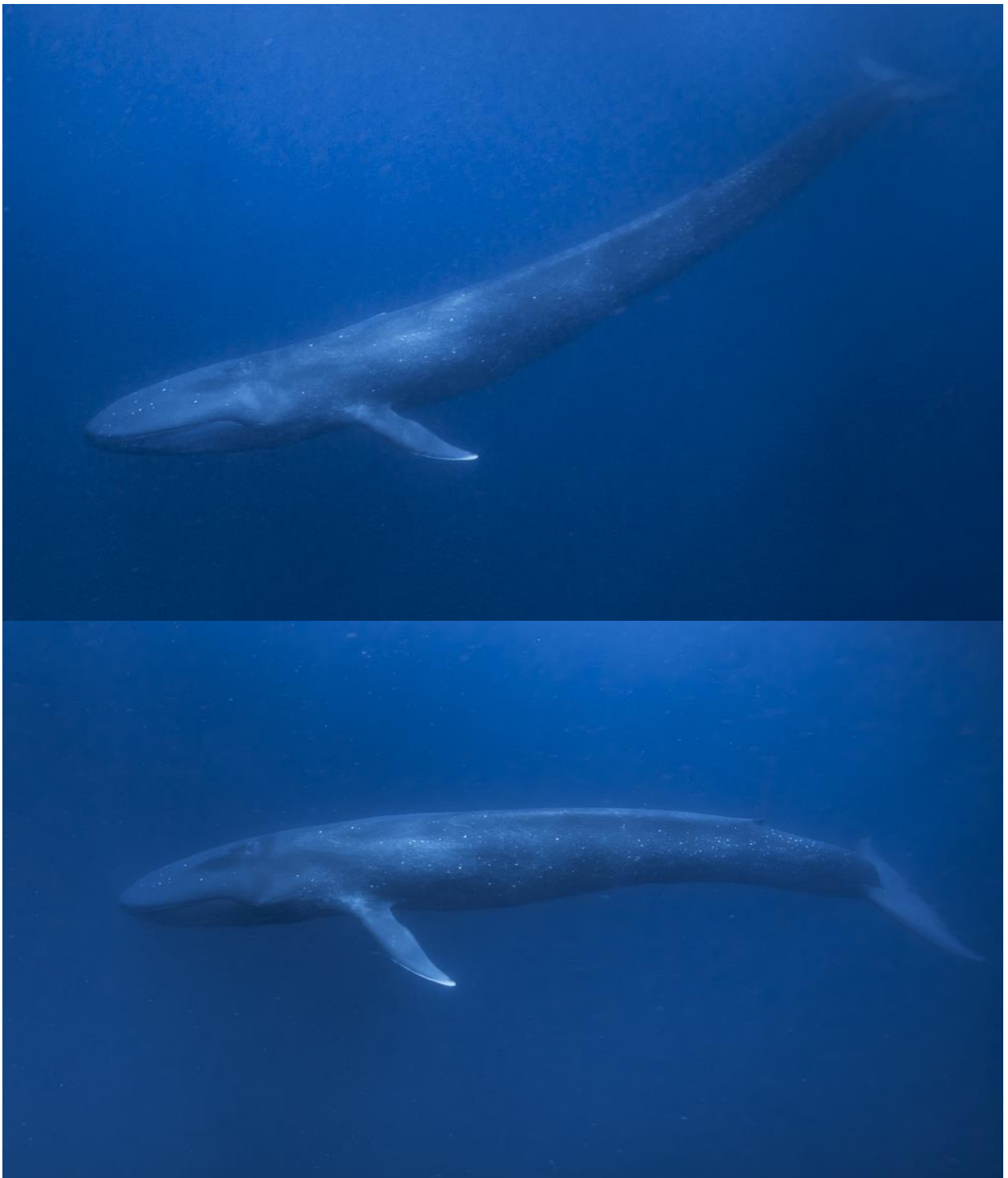
- 1. Dugong (*Dugong dugon*):** Near Dili there are two residential Dugongs. One at about 15 min drive and the other one at about 45 min drive. The nearer one is called Debbie and the farther away one is called Sandy. While I went out for the Blue Whales I sometimes had the opportunity to snorkel at their feeding areas, but didn't see them. I finally had the opportunity to scuba dive and look for them. First for Debbie which I didn't see and the day after for Sandy which I didn't see on my first dive, but then came in after we had already come out. We went in for our second dive and had fabulous views. Read more on my [website](#).







2. **Blue Whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*):** the big one! Having a good view of them under water is not easy to get. I took me some time and effort, but I finally had a couple of views that were extraordinary good. They can actually be seen from the restaurant in Dili which I did a couple of times. I don't know exactly how many I saw, but on average I think we were able to get into the water with one a little more than half of our boat rides. The season would get better as November progressed though. They seemed to come in waves. Sometimes we would see them for a couple of days straight and then have another 3 days with nothing. Read more on my [website](#).









3. **Short-finned Pilot Whale (*Globicephala macrorhynchus*):** I think they are residential. We would find them quite often in groups about the size of 50. Not easy to swim with, pretty much the only way to do that was to get into the water straight from the boat and swim the whole way under water.



4. **Risso's Dolphin (*Grampus griseus*):** They seem to be quite common. We had them on quite a few of our boat rides. I was able to get a look of them below the surface once with a very long swim under water.



5. **Melon-headed Whale (*Peponocephala electra*):** Seen quite often, although irregular. They could occur in big pods. One time we had a very large mixed pod of different species of cetaceans that were probably about 2000 all across the ocean. Very cool. I did get some pictures which I hope are of the right one, because there was some confusion possible with False Killer Whale.



6. **False Killer Whale (*Pseudorca crassidens*):** We had a small pod of about six animals in the big mixed pod of Melon-heads and dolphins which would breach relatively often. They were eventually determined to be False Killers. If anyone has comments regarding ID from my pictures I look forward to hearing it. Since Melon-heads also breach sometimes and the situation was a bit chaotic it's not very easy. The ones below are from two different situations. So not necessarily the same animal.





7. **Common Bottlenose Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*):** Seen only once, oddly enough. The beak did look like it was shorter and more stump than what I'm used to for bottlenose, but I couldn't find any other species it would more likely be. Indo-Pacific is supposed to have a thinner more slender beak which would be exactly the opposite, although I wasn't able to tell them apart very well from the pictures I found online. They are both possible in this location. If anyone can string this into an Indo-Pacific for me I'm all ears because I don't have that one yet.



8. **Pantropical Spotted Dolphin (*Stenella attenuata*):** They were first mistaken for spinner dolphins by me. We once had a large pod of a couple of hundred of them. I saw them on two occasions. I find it's always difficult to count how many there are. They readily associated with the Dwarf Spinners.



9. **Dwarf Spinner Dolphin (*Stenella longirostris roseiventris*):** a very interesting subspecies of spinner dolphin which we saw on most occasions. They also liked to bow ride with our boat. They sometimes look as small as porpoises. Very interesting to see how small they were.





**10. Sperm Whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*):** Seen only once, a pod of about 5. They were skittish and didn't let us get close to them in the water. We made one attempt and they disappeared. I didn't have any record shots. However, Sperm Whales do allow people to swim with them. Later in the season people did. I guess it also depends on specific pods.

**Here are some bonus birds from Bali: Bali Starling and Javan Banded Pitta.**

