

## “NO BUTS”

This dive trip started in the summer of 2005, when we met Shaun and Beth Tierney of SeaFocus. We were passengers on a live aboard in Belize and they were working on their latest book “Diving The World”. The four of us clicked and in the late fall of “06” we got an email asking us if we would like to join them in Indonesia. The ship was the Archipelago Adventure II that travels the Banda Sea and the Spice Islands. It took us about 20 seconds to say “yes.”

We all met in Bali and our flights had been arranged to Ambon. Four hours later, the group boarded large aluminum tenders in Ambon harbor for the five minutes shuttle over to the Archipelago Adventure II. We had a brief introduction and then were escorted to our rooms where our luggage was waiting. Our room was on the upper deck and had a huge picture window with twin beds in the most spacious live aboard room we had ever had. The shower was large enough for two, and the AC was controllable. There was more than enough space to spread out with extra drawers under the bed and with a power strip (110 and 220) on the desk area; it was easy to recharge my camera batteries in the room.

The ship is a wooden ship created for divers 2 years ago in the traditional Indonesian sailing ship fashion. The top deck is for sunning (no shade) with padded chaise lounges, with the feeling of an 18th century sailing ship, including the skull and crossbones flag. One deck down is the dinning room and meeting area, 4 of the 10 cabins and the pilot house. The next deck down are the other 6 cabins, dive decks (10 spots on each side of the ship) and the TV room with camera / photo outlets and drying tables. The bottom deck is for the kitchen and crew. A dumbwaiter is used to get the food to you fast and hot. Because of the design of the ship, in rough seas it does rock and creak with wooden noises. If you are prone to sea sickness, get medication or try another ship.

The Indonesians are world renown for their service with a smile and this ship was no exception. Any need or want was dealt with a genuine smile. Example: Just as I was to make a dive, the left lens of my glasses came out of the frame screw and all. By the time I returned to the ship to deal with this problem, I was handed my repaired glasses along with the original screw that was found on the dive deck. Anything needed was taken care of.

The food was very good and plentiful. 4 meals per day. The breakfasts were a little weak, with eggs every day. We had a great assortment of drinks that you monitored yourself on the honor system. Australian wine or beer were available with dinner. The rooms were cleaned and fresh towels each day, along with a warm diving towel as you came out of the water.

The corals on the walls were beyond description. Colors and size like nothing we have ever seen. The underwater topography was breath-taking to say the least. It was obvious that the volcano's had been active with huge boulders and black sands in certain areas near Ambon. Although muck diving was new to us, we quickly caught on and were spotting Mandarinfish (mating) pipefish, moray eels, robber crabs, seahorses,

and even the allusive flamboyant cuttle fish. The nightly night dives were a whole additional story. More critters than could be written on an underwater slate. Lobsters, eels, crabs, shrimps, cocooned parrot fish, sea snakes... you name it and it was there. The fish life both large and small was inconceivable. We saw more fish on the first check out dive than we did a whole week in the Bahamas one year prior. Butterflyfish, angelfish, jacks, (better know on this ship as Yaks) needlefish, barracudas, tarpons, grunts, snappers, groupers, wrasses. Pipefish, trumpet fish, puffers, burrfish, rays....how about a *Rhinopias eschmeyeri* ( a special hard to find Scorpionfish) If it lives in this part of the ocean, we saw it! We saw sharks, blacktips, whitetips and even an Indonesian version of a Manatee.

When asked what the most exciting part of the trip was and what I will always remember, I would have to say that on one dive in the muck of Banda Neira, I was swimming along with our dive guide when he holds out his hand to stop me. He takes his pointer and slowly and carefully digs it a few inches into the sand. All of the sudden out of nowhere, this huge eel snake leaps out of the sand that has him completely covered, fly's two feet up into the water, and within five seconds, has buried itself tail first back down into the mucky sand. It was a good thing our wetsuits were washed each dive.

The dive operation was good. Antonio was the main man on board. Besides being a delightful person, he was incredibly knowledgeable about everything we saw. The guides were more than willing to point out critters that we might have missed. Maybe even a bit over enthusiastic. One tender on each side of the ship was loaded with photographic divers and one tender with non-photographers on the other. Most of the dives everyone just did their own thing, following their own dive profiles. The briefings were short and direct. The dive deck was a little crowded when everyone was trying to get geared up, but it was manageable. We each had a basket under the bench seats for our extra gear, and the crew would take our wet suits from us and rinse them after each dive. The currents were ripping on 3 of the 37 dives we did. This was the first time we had ever used dive hooks during dives, although some divers were able to adjust without hooks. The tenders were there to pick us up at the end of each hour long dive. Getting in and out of the tenders with tanks on could have been a problem for us uncoordinated people, but the staff helped us with a smile. Most everyone took their tanks, weights, and fins off in the water while the staff lifted it on board the tenders.

We went ashore in two different locations during the twelve night trip. On the largest of the Banda Islands, we went to a nutmeg plantation and we learned all about the development of the Spice Islands. We learned about how at one time the species were more valuable than gold and how thousands had died over the control of the islands. The second shore excursion was to the city of Ambon one of the poorest places on earth. It has suffered since the fighting occurred between Christian and Muslim in 1999, and most of the downtown port area has never been rebuilt.

Twelve nights was just not enough. Each dive we saw something new and exciting. Usually after a dive trip, Patricia and I discuss if we would like to go back to the same place and our usual answer is "Yes,..... but there are other places to see first." This time it was an unequivocal yes with no buts.

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