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## BANDA SEA DIVE CRUISE APRIL 2007

“Looking down over the wall from the shallows we watch the most impressive fish display. Masking the deep blue water, ribbons of red-tooth triggers swim above waves of rainbow runners who mingle with masses of lined snapper; streams of trevally pass beneath swathes of pyramid butterflies. This is the best, most outrageous, most prolific, marine-life screen saver.”

A report for

**archipelago**

resorts & fleet

## Ambon - Banda Sea Dive Cruise

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It has long been an ambition of ours to dive the Spice Islands, the mystique of these far flung, but historically important, islands captivated us. Previous trips had been aborted due to the civil war in the late 1990's but the region has now settled into an easy calm and divers are paving the way for tourism to return.

### The Diving

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It was a surprise to discover that this diving is definitely not Irian Jaya. Being so close, we expected it to be much the same, but we were delighted to find it was actually very different.

Our trip started with an overnight sail to [Lucipara Atoll](#). The long, and sometimes arduous trip was rewarded by some of the best wall diving we have seen in Indonesia. This exposed atoll is utterly pristine - there is no damage, no evidence of fishing and perhaps the best soft corals in the country. Walls are lush with colour and schooling fish. Pelagic species like tuna and trevally are a constant and, as an extra treat, a school of pilot whales came to visit between dives - they are seen on most trips.

The second stop was the [Banda Islands](#). The diving here includes a variety of styles from the fabulous, up-tempo muck right below Banda Neira Pier (mandarinfish on steroids!) to the newest of new coral slopes where thick table and staghorn corals have covered the scar caused by Gunung Api's last explosion just a couple of decades ago. Nearby, Batu Kapal has got to be one of the most impressive deep dives anyone is likely to see with fan corals that have grown to over 5 metres high - and wide. Banda land tours are fascinating. We saw Banda Town

and all its historical sites, had ice cream with the local kids and toured a working nutmeg plantation.

Our third stop was [Nusa Laut](#), where an underwater promontory points away from the coast and towards the most enormous schools of jacks we have ever seen. This is an area for large animals - bumphead parrotfish, eagle rays and small reef sharks - yet there are a surprising number of small critters in the shallows.

A storm diverted us away from the next part of our intended route (Koon) but we were happy to head into [Ambon](#) and spend extra time in that most famous of critter regions, Laha. It's past reputation is well deserved. The diving is not dissimilar to Lembeh - there may be slightly fewer critters by number, but there are certainly as many species. We saw everything from rhinopias to seahorses to inimicus to a shrimp we simply can't name. Ambon Channel also has a great wreck dive - the visibility is low but the life is excellent - and the dives on the outer edge of the channel are a great mix of craggy wall and small creatures.



We also diverted to [Pulau Tiga](#), just southwest of Ambon for a day. These islands are very picturesque but underwater, the currents were rather challenging. Despite that, the wall was an incredible sight.

**Banda Diving** more than exceeded any expectations we had. As a comparison to better known Irian Jaya, there are perhaps slightly fewer species (although who will know that until the same levels of research are done?) and the topography isn't as varied, however, the conditions of the reefs appear to be much better and the muck diving is definitely superior. And best of all - there were no other boats.

## Dive facilities

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Like many Phinisi schooners, the dive stations have been divided into two and run along the gangways outside the salon. Each diver has a personal space, storage box underneath and a nice touch is a little rack to hang dive boots. There is also a removable camera storage unit on each side and huge, freshwater, camera wash tanks.

Dive tanks are filled at the far rear of the boat, so noise is kept to a minimum and after being set up on Day 1, they magically reappear on the tenders just before each dive. The crew are extremely attentive, know who belongs to what within moments and they continually assisting with cameras, hanging suits and generally helping the guests.

Diver tenders consist of two aluminium boats with bench seats that hold tanks in position. Divers can board with just their mask and fins. Although these hold 8 people, cameras can make things a little crowded and this is quickly resolved by shuttling smaller groups, which was fast and efficient.

The tender crew were also very attentive to divers as they ascended, kept watch at all times and were never not ready to pick guests up within moments of surfacing.

A mention must be made of the two local dive guides. Nus, a local Ambonese has been diving these waters for 20 years. Both his knowledge and enthusiasm was outstanding. Samuel will be familiar to many Lembeh divers. His quiet personality is no indication of his amazing underwater talents.



## The Boat

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Archipelago Adventurer II is a big bruiser of a Phinisi schooner and despite her less than traditional look, it has to be said that the conversion has created a well laid out and useful amount of space for both guests and the crew.

The top deck is a gorgeous, open sun trap with very comfy loungers. The upper deck has a great open-air eating space at the rear with access to the sun deck above, then back inside to a glassed-in dining area. This was used for breakfasts, and when there were occasional showers, but meals are mostly taken outside under a retractable sunshade for lunch and beneath the stars at night.

The upper deck cabins are huge. All four have two full size single beds with proper mattresses, large desks for laptops or cameras and a big, ensuite shower and toilet. The lower deck (still above the water line) has 6 more cabins. Some have full size doubles, some twin beds. These cabins vary in size and shape and are all smaller than the ones above. They still have a desk and are a little prettier due to the clever use of divided space (an enclosed shower to one side, then a vanity unit, then the toilet on the other side). This may sound odd but was a really nice layout. The boat supplies good shampoo and body wash, has high quality linen, plenty of towels, and a lot of attention has been paid to storage space with drawer units hidden in every available nook and cranny. The aluminium wall panels are very stylish, but also practical. They bounce a lot of light around the cabins and keep them cool. And the best bit - all cabins have proper reading lights over each bed!

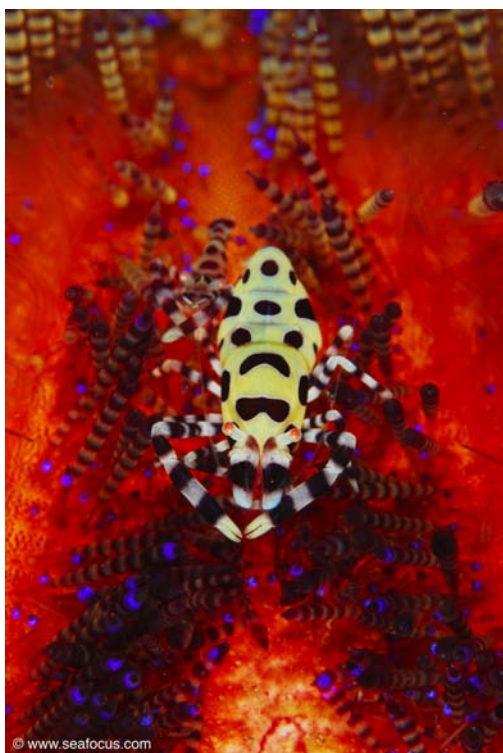
## The Boat

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Upstairs cabins have picture windows to the great outdoors and while the lower cabins do too, these have gangways outside so there's a little less privacy.

On this level, a second "dining" area has been converted for the use of photographers and videographers giving a substantial amount of work space with an extra battery charging station as well as a central meeting haunt for all guests.

The bottom deck, down in the hold has been converted to a full service crew space which was very impressive. Apart from a well laid out and large kitchen, there is a crew lounge and each crew member has their own personal bunk. This exemplary facility showed in what was a truly content and professional crew. We had met many of these guys before, including the incredible Captain Samsudin, who runs a tight - and happy - ship.



## Food and drink

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Archipelago Adventurer II has an excellent Indonesian chef on board who manages things like food allergies extremely well. Evening meals were all a la carte and very impressive with a classy twist to the presentation. These meals could have been served at some of Bali's better restaurants and were complimented by a variety of deserts that were sometimes western and sometimes local.

Good quality wines are available on request although are hard to get to Ambon.

## Planning

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Archipelago's managing team were a pleasure to work with. All requests - no matter how outrageous - were accepted and completed to the best of their ability. As an example, there were

several serious allergy sufferers on board and not a single mistake was made, an indication that both the managers and the Chef were paying attention.

All organisational matters went very smoothly - from accommodation bookings in Bali to transfers, internal flights and so on. Attention to detail showed in even the smallest issues - like checking guest passports and finding one that was nearly out of date even before the guest realised.

## Summary

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Archipelago delivered. This was a great trip, well planned and run. As both divers and journalists we would have no hesitation in recommending either the company or the Banda region although we have to state that the above report has been written based on our personal experiences of the trip we were on. If anyone has specific queries, please feel free to email us at [Beth@seafocus.com](mailto:Beth@seafocus.com) and we will be happy to help or discuss any thoughts you may have.

*Beth and Shaun Tierney, May 8th, 2007*