

# DIVING WILD INDONESIA

## BANDA LAVA DIVE

by Tony Karacsonyi

**R**oving underwater photographer: Tony Karacsonyi heads off to the famous Banda Islands – 'Spice Islands' in the Banda Sea, aboard the Archipelago Adventurer II - one of the finest liveaboards operating in Indonesian waters. Tony's adventure started in Ambon.

'Diving in the Banda Sea surpassed my wildest expectations. I couldn't believe the volume of marine life – big reef fish, small fish, pelagics and acres of healthy undamaged coral. To see lots of big reef fish on healthy coral reefs is a rare thing these days' says Tony.

'We dived four to five times a day, on magnificent walls covered in soft corals, hard corals and over-sized barrel sponges. Each dive on the trip seemed to be getting better than the last.

We went 'black sand' muck diving in Banda Harbour, in the lee of a 600 metre volcano named Gunung Api. Here, Ali Murtadlo and Madi Dwi Suarsana, formerly of Larry Smith's famous liveaboard, found mandarin fish, orange, pink and black frogfish, spiny devilfish, Coleman's shrimp, two spot blue-ringed octopus – a muck diver's paradise. Millie Wheeler found a pair of small black frogfish with white spots. We dived the lava flows of the still active volcano, absolutely covered in hard corals. It seemed as if the lava had stimulated the hard coral growth.

Manuk Island, a remote volcano dive, offered extraordinary diving, with steep walls covered in huge barrel sponges, and pelagics, including a large hammerhead. Photo Pro: Casey Mahaney, and Madi, spotted the hammer. The shallows were a melting pot of tropical reef species, including an enormous school of feeding parrotfish. There were streams of bubbles escaping from the reef shallows, indicating volcanic activity. Manuk Island is a seabird sanctuary, with sea

snakes everywhere underwater. We dived various sites in the Banda Islands, including Run, Ai and Hatta Islands.

The Bandas have an astonishing history, and were the focus of the 'Spice Race' in the 17th century. Nutmeg and mace, were worth the price of gold, and it was during this time, that several expeditions set sail from England and other European countries - to discover the mystical Spice Islands. No one knew exactly where the Banda's and the nutmeg were, as world maps were still blank, for this part of the world. One English expedition funded by English merchants, saw three ships try to reach the Banda's, by crossing the seas around the North Pole. In short, the ships became trapped in ice, the crews starved, and the ships crushed by ice.

The Portuguese found the Banda's first, and started building a fort, but were chased off by arrows and threats of head hunting. The Dutch were next – who brutally conquered the main Banda's and built a substantial fort – still there today.

There was an infamous massacre by the Dutch, which shocked their own countrymen. But the Dutch had far less control over Run Island, ten miles away. The English befriended the island chiefs, securing Run's nutmeg trade.

The nutmeg on Run Island was so important to the Dutch, that in 1667, the Dutch swapped Run, with the British, for an island now known as Manhattan. It is amazing that the events which took place in the Banda Islands, in those days, shaped the other side of the globe.

At Glory Holes, in Ambon, we explored exciting caves and tunnels underwater. There were squadrons of mobula rays – Jason Yanowitz spotted five, and Lou Anne spotted more. Mike Doelle found *Dasycaris Zanzibarica* on a whip coral.

Our ten day expedition culminated in Ambon with several fascinating muck dives. Here we discovered red rhinopias, orange/pink/black

frogfish, blue eels, leaf scorpion fish, and one mother of a stonefish. The intensity of marine life at this dive site was so intense, that one could spend an entire week diving here alone. The photographers were going crazy, including myself, with so many rare critters to shoot. I can still hear Bruce Rasner saying 'Ali, I've got most things on my wish list, I just need you to find a Wunderpuss'

Archipelago's Banda Sea trips often include Lucipara – seven islands around 12 hours from Ambon or Banda.

Lucipara is often coined 'the best wall diving in the world', and will thrill big fish lovers, with schooling hammerheads, eagle rays and jumbo tuna.

Many guests commented that it was the most comfortable and well appointed liveaboard they had ever been on. The quality of food was on par with the finest restaurants, and the level of service – with 17 fun loving Indonesians, was extraordinary. Their two aluminium tenders were always ready, four to five times a day, with fresh tanks. When we got back, they even washed and hung our wetsuits to dry, ready for the next dive. The freshwater shower on the dive deck was very convenient, and for night dives – they kindly turned up the hot water on the dive deck. They treat you to a hot chocolate – after every night dive. In short, guests get terribly spoiled, and all you do is dive, eat and sleep – and party if you like. The crew were great company, as was Sue: our 'Yorkshire' dive master, and it was with a little sadness when we left them.

The guest cabins are enormous, with room to move. There is a photography work room, with several work tables. The underwater photographers: Bruce Rasner, Casey Mahaney, David Snyder, Chris Corna, Mike Zieg, Millie Wheeler and Edie Summey, made good use of these with digital photography gear. Bruce was even giving his new Canon G9 a workout on some dives. There's a strobe and battery



**Archipelago Adventurer II, off Ambon. This liveaboard has set a new standard for liveaboards in Indonesia. Many divers aboard commented that 'it was the finest liveaboard they had ever been on'.**



**One of Archipelago's dive tenders returns with photographer's Millie Wheeler and Edie Summey.**



**Our Divemaster: Sue and Jason Yanowitz, suit up during a dive briefing aboard Archipelago Adventurer II.**



**Kids swimming at Ambon. One can take a tour of Ambon on your last day, if you wish.**

charging station, with power points in the cabins also. The dining rooms are located, both indoors and outdoors, upstairs on the mid rear deck.

When cruising, there is barely a sound through the thick timber hull. There isn't even any engine noise – something I'm not used to on liveaboards, but greatly appreciate. I can't speak more highly about this spacious liveaboard.

The Archipelago Adventurer II, is the finest liveaboard I've dived on, and in real terms, one gets to do a lot of diving - with great ease. I think this liveaboard has set a new standard for liveaboards in Indonesia, and the Asia/Pacific' says Tony.

'The ship also runs dive trips to Komodo and Raja Ampat, including the fairly unexplored

islands of Misool. Some of the divers on our trip – Millie, Lou Anne and Edie, were doing doubles i.e. Banda Sea trip, followed by Raja Ampat.

So, if you're up to it – four to five action-packed dives per day, 17 fun loving crew to look after you, gourmet meals and master critter spotters of 'Larry Smith' liveaboard fame – Ali and Madi, book onto the Archipelago Adventurer II'

**HOW TO BOOK;** Contact; Archipelago Resorts & Fleet; info@archipelago-fleet.com; www.archipelago-fleet.com. tel; +62 (0) 361 282 369. fax; +62 (0)361 286 490.

\*Keep an eye on Sportdiving magazine, as Tony's full Banda Sea story and amazing critter shots, will be coming up soon.



**Bruce Rasner makes good use of the photography work tables. These were great for getting cameras ready.**



**The crew catches fresh fish for lunch. The meals on Archipelago Adventurer II, were on par with the finest land-based restaurants.**



**David Snyder in action - Banda Islands.**