

> MANDARINFISH ARE EVERYWHERE, WEAVING AMONG THE BOULDERS AND SEA URCHINS. RIGHT ON DARK THEY START RISING, RELEASING THEIR EGGS AND SPERM INTO THE BANDA SEA. IN THAT BRIEF MOMENT OF ECSTASY, YOU CAN BLAST AWAY WITH YOUR STROBE WITHOUT DISTURBING THEM, TO CAPTURE A MAGICAL SCENE. AND IT HAPPENS EVERY NIGHT!



The black sand in Banda Harbour is ultimate muck. Gurnards spread their electric blue wings to scoot across the sand. A crocodile snake eel *Branchysomophis crocodilinus* pokes its red nose from the sand and there are fire urchins topped with striking Coleman shrimp. We come across a photographer shooting a closed cockle shell. The shell opens and a two-spot blue ring octopus emerges, then crawls back inside and snaps its shell shut. That's one hot cockle! There are dragonets and spiny devilfish *Inimicus dicactylus* spreading their circular pectorals. There is a pink giant frogfish on a fishing boat's mooring rope, banded coral shrimp, scorpionfish, black frogfish. We see pegasus seamount *Eurypegasus draconis*, rigid razorfish red striped with yellow noses, and red shrimp living on a blue seastar *linckia laevigata*. We could have been on another planet under the fishing boats in

Banda Harbour. Gunung Api, a 650 metre high active volcano, hisses only a few hundred metres away.

The 10 volcanic Banda islands in the Indonesian province of Maluku rise from depths of four to six kilometres. Scattered bones underwater testify to Banda's remarkable history - 44 Orang Kaya (Bandanese leaders or 'powerful men') were called to a meeting by the Dutch, and beheaded by hired Japanese mercenaries.

We are here for adventure, exploring the Banda, or Spice Islands, on a 10 day cruise aboard the *Archipelago Adventurer II*. We have clocked up 20 dives so far - each seem to be getting better than the last. Tomorrow we will climb Fort Belgica, built by the Dutch in 1611 on Banda Neira, bargain for circa 1800 coins, and depart for a volcano named Manuk - covered in seabirds and rich in sea snakes. The Lucipara atolls lay 12 hours from Ambon and Banda, with wallpaper hammerheads and world class wall diving.

MANUK VOLCANO Both active volcanoes and nature reserves - Manuk Volcano and Mt Api (north of Wetar) are the greatest

bird islands left in southeast Asia. They are breeding and roosting sites for millions of frigatebirds, tropicbirds, boobies, terns and smaller species. This eco-region contains more than 225 species of terrestrial birds - 43 of which are endemic.

This is an amazing dive. Descending along a wall to 40 metres, the rock is covered in many remarkable barrel sponges between 20-40 metres. Madi, our critter finder starts banging on his tank as he and photo pro Casey Mahaney watch a large hammerhead slide past. The blue is alive with rainbow runners, surgeonfish, jumbo dogtooth tuna and big barracuda - which become very excited when dive guide Sue Jarvis rattles her plastic water bottle.

In the reef shallows, streams of bubbles gurgle from the seabed indicating volcanic activity. The seafloor is black sand. Flocks of feeding parrotfish fed en-masse, crunching coral audibly while being haggled by a solo parrotfish - possibly *Chlorurus microrhinos*. Manuk is really special, with green sea snakes galore.

Diving in Banda spoils you. The thousands of reef species,

ADDICTION

: TONY KARACSONYI

Main: Ragged-finned firefish, Nailaka Island.
Top: Rich marinelife, reef shallows at Nusa Lout.
Right: Glory holes at Ambon, a magnificent dive.



including clown triggers, emperor angelfish, regal angelfish, longnose hawkfish, coronation trout, and coral trout, all become a blur. The more unusual critters stay in mind, such as the xeno'crabs, saron shrimp and ghost pipefish. Master critter finders Ali Murtadlo and Madi Dwi Suarsana keep the rare and unusual marine life coming. "Wunderpuss!" yells Bruce Rasner. "Ali, if I can now get a wunderpuss and a mimic octopus on the next dive, I'll be happy... but I still need some good shots of the jacks." Ali's face lights up. "I'll see what I can do!"

Our 'most wanted' list, marked on a chalk board, includes dugongs and hammerheads and is getting ticked off fast. Dugong mother and baby, check - seen at Nusa Lout. Supersized hammer, check - at Manuk. Ghost pipefish, check - plenty. Saron shrimp, check - at Nusa Lout.

The guys from Steamboat Springs, Chris Corma and Jason Yanowitz, spotted the dugongs. "Can you believe the speed with which that dugong was moving, with the baby tucked right by her side?" says Chris. Michael Doelle spotted two kinds of triggerfish, titan and yellow margin, fighting over a crab. While the triggers were squabbling, a smaller wrasse devoured the crab. The big bump-head parrotfish are awesome - as their mouths open and close, you can see their big coral crunching teeth. I think this, and the huge flock of parrotfish at Manuk Island, are my two best sightings - although the red rhinopias at Ambon was pretty hot.

KARANG HATA This is a spectacular reef, with hundreds of red-tooth triggerfish. Several Napoleon wrasse play a leisurely game of tag with us. There are dogtooth tuna, chaetodon, big snappers and barracuda on the hunt. There are many angelfish, plus an emperor angelfish with a yellow flutefish entourage. Clown triggerfish, unicornfish, fire gobies, rainbow runner and regal angelfish, make this one of our best dives.

GLORY HOLES Near Ambon is a descent through large holes in the reef top to a chamber at 20 metres, from which you can exit through large tunnels to the 30 metre deep wall outside. We spot Xeno crabs, *Xenocarcinus tuberculatus*, and *Dasycaris zanzibarica*, both living on seawhips. Green-striped nembrotha nudibranchs with orange gills stud the walls. Scorpionfish, fire gobies, cowries, butterfly cods and moray eels, black with gold speckles, provide plenty of subjects. Twelve mobula rays are spotted out in the blue.

AMBON MUCK The intensity of marine life on this site is unrivalled, with almost every species of Indo-Pacific reef fish,

THE SPICE RACE During the late 16th and 17th centuries nutmeg and mace were priced like gold, especially as London physicians claimed nutmeg was the only cure for 'the plague' sweeping England. Several expeditions set sail from England and Europe to discover the mystical 'Spice Islands', the source of nutmeg. A three-ship expedition funded by English merchants tried to reach the Banda Islands by skirting the Arctic. Two vessels became trapped by ice, the crews starved, and the ships crushed. The Portuguese discovered the Bandas first and began building a fort, but were repulsed by the Bandanese. The Dutch then brutally conquered the main Bandas and built a fort but had little control over Ai and Run Islands 10-20 kilometres away. The English befriended Run's Bandanese, secured the island's nutmeg trade, and built fortified trading posts on Ai and Run. The Dutch so coveted Run Island's nutmeg that in 1667 under the Treaty of Breda, the English traded Run for Manhattan Island in the Americas - later to become New York. The Dutch retained full control of the Banda Archipelago for almost 200 years. The novel *Nathaniel's Nutmeg* is wonderful reading.



Red rhinopias



Left: *Reticulidia halgerda* is one of the phyllidiids.



Right: Coleman shrimp on firestar, Banda Harbour muck dive.

Top: *Nembrotha nudibranch* with egg spirals on ascidian.
Bottom: Snagged fishing net, overgrown with soft corals and crinoids, Nusa Lout.

including seven different rhinopias plus red and purple specimens, and a pair of white-leaf scorpionfish. The many frogfish include a jumbo orange one, one like a black sponge, plus a pink specimen. The rhinopias hang around 40 metres and frogfish at 10-20 metres. There's a huge stonefish, so take care. Blue ribbon eels, *Rhinomuraena quaesita*, and their juveniles (black males and yellow females) can be seen living in the rubble patches. Large blennies peer from twisted pipes. This site is where Indonesia's tropical muck diving craze began. The Lembeh muck diving sites took off afterward. Muck diving isn't for everyone, but photographers will go crazy here. Watch your depths though! After you do the deepie, you can happily see and shoot everything in less than 15 metres, with exciting rubble patches at six to seven metres.

NUSA LOU Napoleon wrasse, crinoid gobies, black moray eels with gold spots, ornate ghost pipefish on crinoids, and tiny yellow bobtail squid all keep us well occupied here. There are tomato clownfish in anemones with bulbous tentacles, emperor angelfish, Moorish idol, coral trout, coronation trout, and green turtles. The coral bommies are magnets for anthias. Michael found a trumpet shell eating linckia. Eagle rays, black snappers, garden eels, green plate corals, and brown cabbage corals make for a great dive. An underside of an arch at 15 metres is covered in yellow soft corals.

MAIUKU-AMED A school of jacks hovers in the blue, including a rainbow runner and surgeonfish. Back on the reef, there are clown triggerfish, purple queen, bumphead parrotfish, longnose butterflyfish, and yellow goatfish being serviced by cleaner wrasse. Casey scores a yellow ghost pipefish living on a yellow crinoid. Sue scores two ghost pipefish. We night dive this reef, rewarded with Saron shrimp, *Saron* sp., and painted crayfish.

BANDA ONE Here we wall dive close to an island covered in pandanus with limestone shores. There's a split in the wall forming a swimthrough festooned in black coral and seafans. We enjoy regal angelfish, *Pygoplites diacanthus*, emperor angelfish, *Pomacanthus imperator*, chaetodon and orange-band surgeonfish, *Acanthurus olivaceus*.

The Banda Sea has some of the most pristine diving in Indonesia. One is left in awe at the untouched coral and intensity of the fish life - both big and small. It is a rare find these days. It renews one's faith that there are still unspoiled wild places left underwater.

ARCHIPELAGO ADVENTURER II

This sturdy timber Indonesian vessel is comfortable and luxurious. When it is underway, even in a rough sea, you can't hear or feel the waves hitting her hull or any engine noise - although being beamy it may roll up in big seas. The ship has an outdoor/indoor dining area on the rear mid-deck. The guest cabins are big, with double beds, plus a toilet and shower in each. On deck, the interior has photographic work tables plus a strobe/battery charging bench with 220V/110V power. The dive deck has benches for cameras and a freshwater wash tub. The meals are of restaurant quality, with seafood, chicken, beef, salads and fruit juices. The bar is well stocked with beer and wine. You'll be hard pressed to lose any weight, even diving four times a day. There are showers on the dive decks, with hot water cranked up for night dives. Night divers are greeted with cups of hot chocolate. With 17 fun-loving crew, divers are very well looked after. The crew refill the tanks and have them back on the tenders, so all you have to do is slip on your BC and dive.

Archipelago Resorts & Fleet also operate the *Adventurer II* in Raja Ampat and Komodo each year. Some divers on our trip were doing doubles - Banda Sea followed by Raja Ampat - where there are dive sites reputed to be the 'richest in the Indo-Pacific'.

LINKS
Archipelago
Resorts & Fleet
www.archipelago-fleet.com



GETTING THERE

From Australia, fly to Bali or Jakarta, with Jetstar, Garuda or another carrier, then Ambon via Makassar.



Archipelago Resorts & Fleet can book your domestic flights in Indonesia. Archipelago Adventurer II Departs from and returns to Ambon.

BEST TIME TO DIVE October/November, March/April are the best months to cruise in Banda due to wind and ocean conditions.

WHAT TO TAKE Dive gear, cameras, torch, good sunscreen - and a jar of Marmite for Sue. Check with your doctor about malaria medication. And remember, Bali is well worth a few extra days touring!

