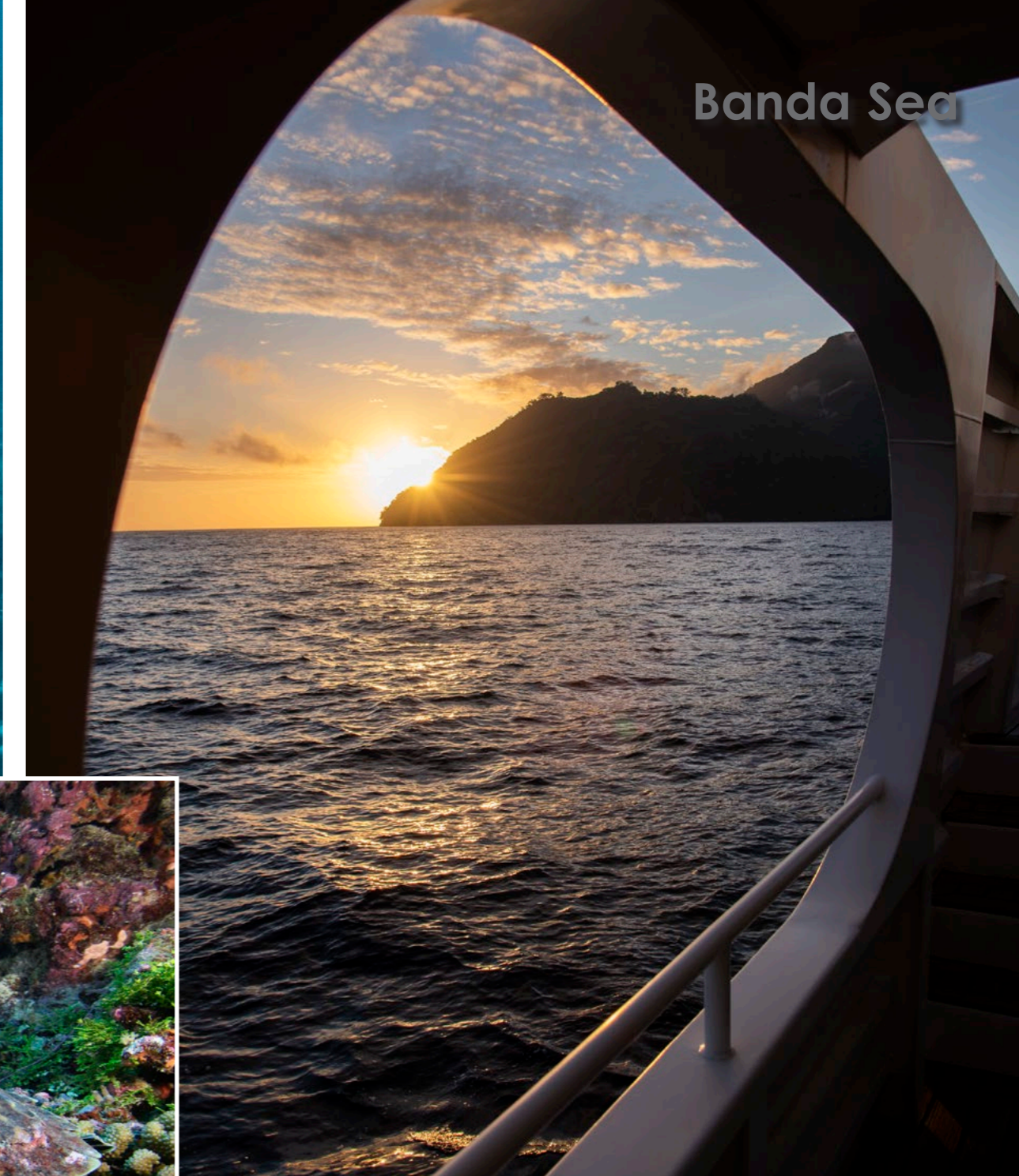




Banda Sea

— *Diving the Spice Islands of Indonesia*

Text and photos by Matthew Meier



Banda Sea

Scalloped hammerhead shark swimming over a hard coral reefscape (above) and hawksbill sea turtle lifting its head while feeding on a sponge (right) at Suanggi Island; Sunrise from behind Serua Island, through a window on the deck of the *Solitude Adventurer* liveaboard (far right); Diver with large sea fan, Hole in the Wall, Hatta Island (previous page)

Five minutes into my first dive in the Banda Sea, I came face-to-face with a scalloped hammerhead shark, gliding effortlessly in its underwater realm as it emerged from the depths to investigate the alien visitors descending from above. A second hammerhead swam past a moment later but was less bold in its approach and quickly disappeared back into the abyss. I had come to this remote corner of the globe after hearing stories of schooling hammerhead sharks, abundant sea snakes, magnificent coral formations, huge sponges and the possibility of observing other pelagic migrants such as manta rays, false killer whales, leatherback sea turtles and the pygmy blue whale. My efforts would not go unrewarded.



The Banda Sea is a region within the Indonesian archipelago, located in Southeast Asia, between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It is situated south of the Maluku Islands, east of

the island of Sulawesi and north of Timor Island. This secluded body of water contains dozens of volcanic islands in an area covering over 180,000 sq mi (470,000 sq km).

Dutch eventually acquired all of Indonesia and governed the nation until the end of World War II, when the Indonesian people were ultimately granted their independence. To this

The Banda Islands, also known as the Spice Islands, helped put the area on the map in the early 1600s when the Dutch East India Company took control of the trade routes for native spices such as nutmeg, pepper and cloves. The

day, many of the islands in the Banda Sea remain uninhabited and most are separated by large expanses of open ocean. Of the 267 million people living in Indonesia (making it the world's largest island nation), only about 19,000 reside within the Banda Islands.

Getting there

Our eight-day voyage began and ended in Ambon, which is the capital city of the Maluku province at the northern end of the Banda Sea. Daily local flights exist from several desti-



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: At Ambon, a pair of white-eyed moray eels poking their heads out from beneath a ledge, a yellow and red shortfin lionfish, a pale yellow leaf scorpionfish resting on the reef, an ornate ghost pipefish camouflaged against a patch of sea grass, and a mating pair of solar-powered *Phyllodesmium nudibranchs* perched on a sponge



frogfish but instead was treated to several leaf scorpionfish, multiple seahorses, zebra crabs and Coleman shrimp on fire urchins, a cute baby barramundi, mating solar-powered nudibranchs, ornate ghost pipefish,

a painted frogfish and a pair of white-eyed moray eels—quite the impressive array of species, and not a bad consolation prize, especially for check-out dives.



nations within Indonesia, including Bali, Jakarta, Makassar and Manado. Upon arrival, my dive partner and I transferred to our liveboard dive boat anchored in the bay, as it is the only way to access this out-of-the-way destination. The *Solitude Adventurer*, a recently renovated, spacious and stable 118ft (36m) long aluminum catamaran, would be our home for the next week.

Ambon is famous in and of itself as one of the top macro and

muck diving destinations on the planet. Divers will often visit for a week or more to experience as many of the weird and wonderful critters that exist here as possible. Our travel plan only allotted time for two check-out dives with which to dial in our

buoyancy, knock off the rust and work on photographing those spectacular macro subjects. I had grand illusions of finding the endemic and rare psychedelic



pinnacles covered in large coral formations and huge pink barrel sponges, as well as the aforementioned curious hammerheads, this was our first taste of what the Banda Sea had to offer. Our second immersion of the

Suanggi Island

After dinner, we departed Ambon's harbor and made an overnight crossing to Suanggi Island, arriving in time for an early morning dive at a site called Jackpot. Home to deep-water

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Mixture of hard and soft corals creating an “underwater cityscape” (above) and brown booby bird (right) at Manuk Island

morning was on a nearby wall at a site called Ping Pong. We encountered several hawksbill sea turtles cruising over the coral formations, had our first of many sightings of an olive sea snake, an elusive bumphead wrasse made a brief appearance and there were plenty of massive sponges, some too large to effectively photograph properly without my fisheye lens.

During our surface interval, the boat motored to nearby Run Island where we made two exploratory dives in the afternoon. Sea conditions prevented us from accessing the normal dive sites around the island, so we anchored in a more protected area and dived sloping walls inundated with hard coral formations and schooling fusiliers,

mammoth sea fans, more impressive sponges and several sea turtles.

Manuk Island

We awoke at Manuk Island the next morning a little later than expected because rough seas dictated a slower-than-usual passage, as we departed the Banda Islands for the Forgotten Islands. The wind and waves that had picked up overnight were also contributing to choppy sea conditions around Manuk that were not conducive to responsibly launch divers in small inflatable boats. The catamaran was capable of cutting through the swell to get to the premier dive sites, but boarding the skiffs from alongside the



mother ship was not advisable and nor could the RHIBs navigate safely through the waves to get around the island themselves.

Similar to the previous afternoon, we wisely elected to anchor on the leeward side of the island and spent the day diving a site called Coconut Corner. The visibility was not ideal due to the turbulent seas, but this site boasted some of the largest hard coral formations I had seen to date in my nearly 30 years of diving experience. Amazing

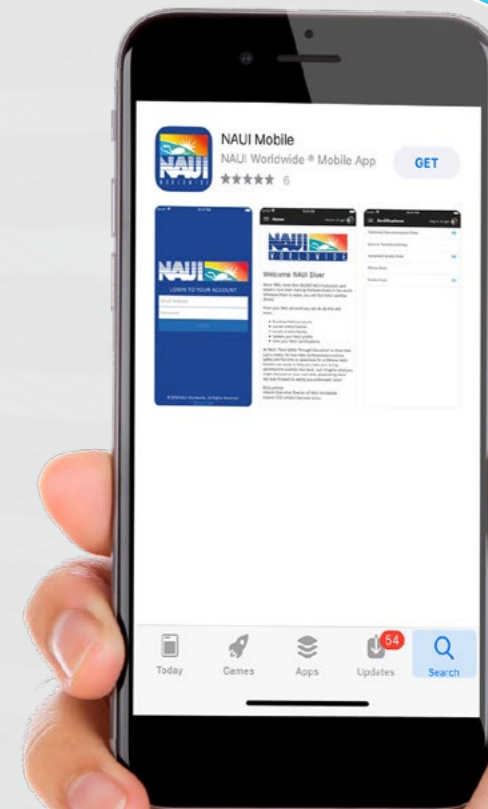


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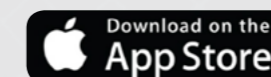
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At Manuk Island, large sponges and orange soft corals decorate the reef (left), an olive sea snake swims over the hard coral reef (below), a diver hovers over a massive aggregation of *Acropora* sp. plate corals (bottom right) and an aerial view captures the moment scuba divers back-roll off an inflatable RHIB into the water (lower left)



coral bommies covered in plate and staghorn corals, interlaced with sea fans, leather corals and both green and purple elephant ear sponges.

Manuk Island is also famously known for its considerable number of olive sea snakes and we saw copious amounts on every dive, along with a few banded sea kraits thrown in for good measure. Both species breathe air and each trip to the surface for oxygen puts them at risk of predation, so it should not be surprising that the snakes use every bit of cover they can find to conceal themselves when venturing out in the open. Perhaps also exploiting the body heat we humans emit, divers are often startled as



snakes emerge from under an arm or between a pair of legs while traveling to and from the surface or simply while inspecting their new neighbors. We made three dives at this site throughout the day

and spotted both hawk-bill and green sea turtles, a small school of bluefin trevally, numerous jacks and triggerfish hunting on the reef and a colorful, juvenile rockmover wrasse in constant motion, doing



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Large school of horse-eye jack fish, or big-eye jacks (left) and large pink barrel sponge, elephant ear sponge and orange soft corals with the bright green black sun corals on reef (bottom right) at the volcanic island of Serua (below)

Banda Sea



its best to stay hidden and avoid being photographed.

Forgotten Islands

Departing Manuk, we headed southwest toward the Forgotten Islands of Serua and Kekah for another overnight transit. The wind and waves gradually subsided throughout the evening, allowing for faster cruising speeds and a much more restful night's sleep.

Serua is a relatively large island with multiple volcanic cinder cones, one of which is still belching steam. Kekah, located just adjacent, is so minuscule it barely appears on the map. The *Adventurer* anchored in a small protected cove behind Kekah Island and we proceeded to make four dives at

a site called Kekah's Corner.

The topography beneath the waves consisted of a sloping wall of corals with occasional barrel sponges and a shallow coral garden at the top of the reef. Water temperatures were a few degrees cooler than earlier in the trip and several degrees cooler below the thermocline that materialized between 60-90 ft (18-27m). There was also a steady, nutrient-rich current that turned most dives into a pleasant, albeit hazy, drift.

Scalloped hammerheads

The main attraction at Kekah's Corner this time of year is the consistent presence of scalloped hammerhead sharks. They were seen at depth, often below the thermocline, in large schools

or walls of sharks, and at other times, appeared alone or in small groups, cruising along the wall or navigating the shallows. As it had seemingly been throughout our trip, the visibility was not ideal, and on this particular day, the topside overcast conditions contributed to a very dark underwater environment for photography.

We saw hammerheads on every dive, but as luck would have it, I was either not able to get close enough to capture them or did not see them until they were already past me. On one dive, I spent the first 45 minutes staring off into the blue, waiting in vain for the sharks to appear, and then was sadly oblivious to a hammerhead swimming by only a few feet away, when I had finally let a hawksbill sea turtle distract





At Serua Island, a large school of scalloped hammerhead sharks swim in murky deep water along the sheer reef wall (above), a yellow-lipped sea snake hunts for food on the coral reef (top right), a large cuttlefish swims over soft and hard corals (right), and a large black-spotted moray eel, also known as a honeycomb or leopard moray, peeks out of its den (left).



me for a photo.

Fortunately, we had the flexibility of an extra day on our itinerary and a group decision was easily made to stay for added time with the hammerheads. The

next morning, I photographed a spectacular sunrise as it sprung up from behind Serua Island. Over time, the sky transitioned into a beautiful, sunny blue with intermittent puffy, white clouds. The colors

of the reef expanded dramatically with the addition of sunlight, and it seemed we were diving an entirely different site as we relished four more chances to swim with the sharks. Descending for our first dive, I noticed that the hazy visibility had somewhat improved overnight but would still be presenting challenges—most notably, the inability to see the hammerheads coming from far off, contrasted with the need to be in their immediate vicinity for clear photos. Wanting to take advantage of the gorgeous sunlight, I attempted to reshoot several reef

scenes I had captured the day before, all the while keeping one eye in the blue for the hammerheads.

We came across the same distracting sea turtle from the day before and discovered a sizable broadclub cuttlefish

hovering in the shallows. I photographed several sea snakes throughout the day and a massive honeycomb eel, poorly hidden under a small coral head.

On one dive, the current swept us farther than normal down the reef and we



Diver with mushroom leather corals, a purple sea fan and orange soft corals on the reef at Hatta Island (above); Aerial view of the massive submerged coral reef at Karang Hatta (top right); Large colony of mushroom leather corals growing near the surface, with Snell's window overhead (right); Octopus blowing sand as it emerges from a crevice in the coral reef (left)



saw the heart-wrenching destruction that dynamite fishing had inflicted on the environment. Healthy, vibrant corals were reduced to a field of broken rubble that would take years, if not decades, to rebuild—an entire mini-ecosystem destroyed in the short-sighted goal of the few fish that floated to the surface after the explosion. According to the Kekah's village chief, the devastation was caused by a desperate act of struggling fishermen

from a distant neighboring island.

Hammerheads were again witnessed on every dive, and I personally saw them on three of four but regrettably, I never managed to get close enough for a publishable photograph.

Hatta Island

The boat pulled anchor soon after our last dive, and we start-

ed a 12-hour crossing back to the Banda Islands. Favorable tail winds and calmer seas made for a smooth ride up to the shallow, submerged reef called Karang Hatta. Just south of Hatta Island,

this colossal crescent-shaped reef system is exposed at low tide and features colorful coral walls with schooling jacks and fusilier fish, immense elephant ear sponges and huge sea fans.



Diver in silhouette with pink barrel sponges growing on the side of a sheer wall at Banda Neira Island (above); Local children paddle a canoe (left).

branching corals.

After two dives, we transitioned up to Hatta Island and made our third dive of the day at a site called Goa Hatta. Also known as Hole in the Wall, this dive begins with a vertical descent through a gap in the reef, which opens up to a wall covered in large sea

her silhouetted in the hole while framing a large sea fan in the foreground. Our dive guide, Eme, was instrumental in preparing us in advance for what to expect and after several attempts, with numerous hand signal adjustments, I was very excited with the results (see title page).

Banda Neira Island

Departing Hatta, we made the short trek up to Banda Neira Island where we anchored in the protected harbor for the night. Our last dive of the day was at twilight on the other side of the anchorage in anticipation of observing mating mandarinfish. Hovering

I saw several moray eels, an octopus out hunting in the daylight, plentiful reef fish and a cute baby whitetip reef shark swimming amongst the

fans, barrel sponges, black sun corals and colonies of leather corals. I spent a good bit of time working with my dive buddy and underwater model to get

Banda Sea

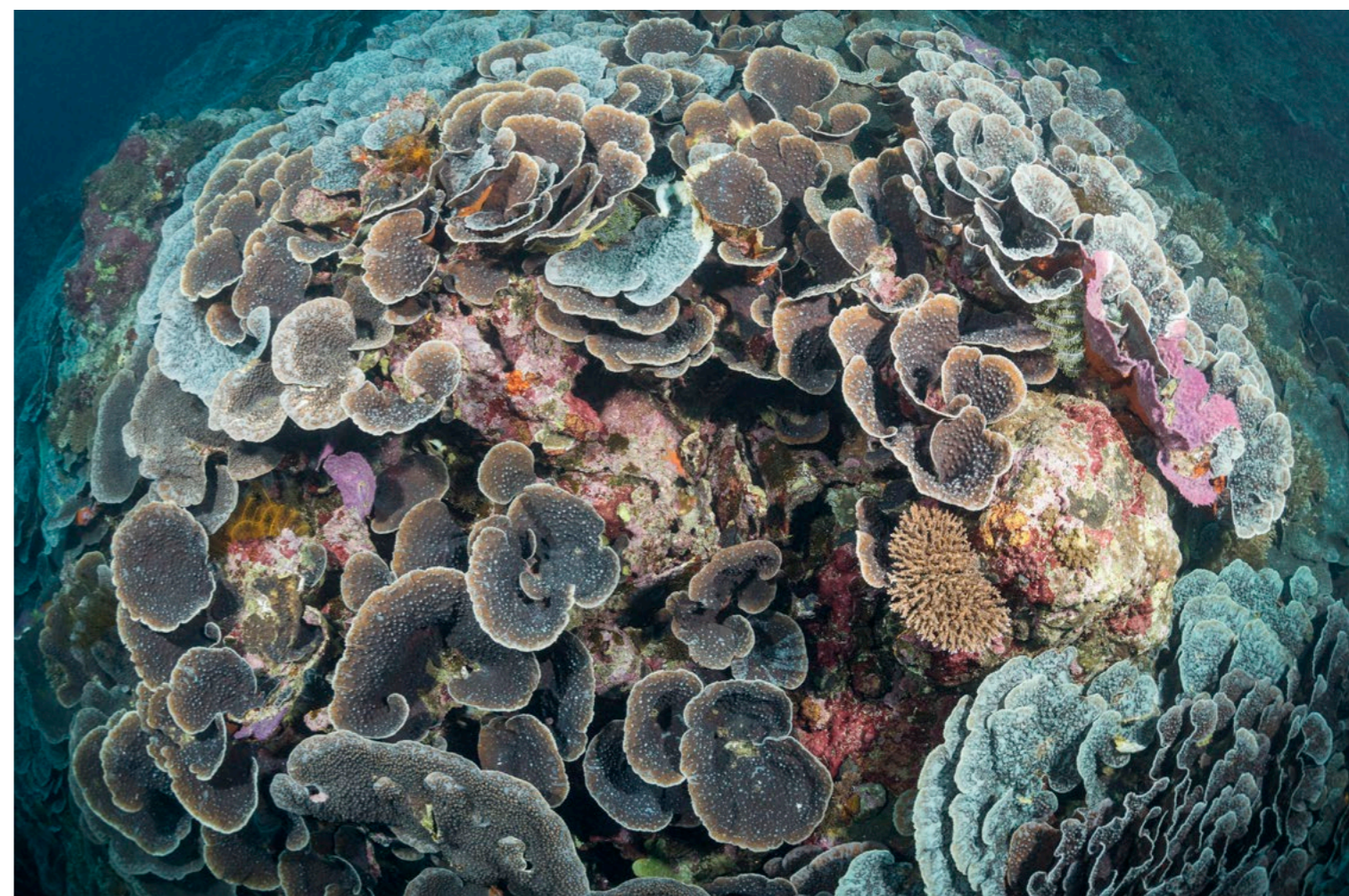


Aggregation of butterflyfish and triggerfish on colorful coral reef at Banda Neira Island (above); Aerial view of the eastern edge of Banda Island with its volcano visible in the background (top right)





At Banda Neira Island, a diver hovers over a huge hard coral bommie at Lava Flow dive site (above) where a colorful reef can be found (right), a pair of big pink barrel sponges grow near the base of a sheer wall (top right), and a large yellow-green map pufferfish swims amongst an aggregation of redtooth triggerfish and pyramid butterflyfish (left).



near the edge of a field of staghorn corals, we witnessed several males displaying and posturing for the females in hopes of pairing off for a frantic rush up into the water column to release eggs and sperm.

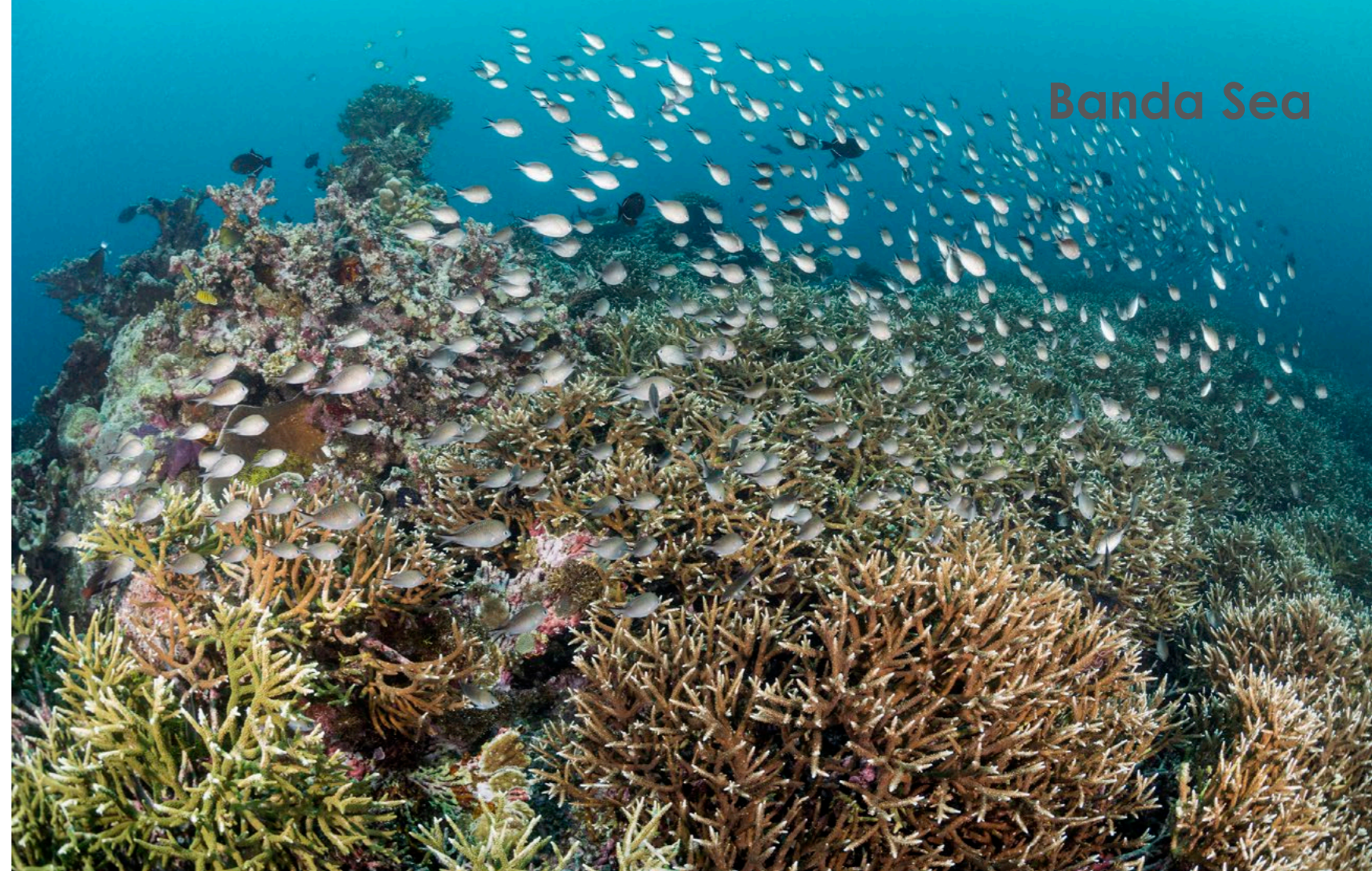
Mandarinfish complete this ritual every night at dusk, though divers do not always get to see the entire mating behavior.

The next morning, after our second night at anchor, we shifted

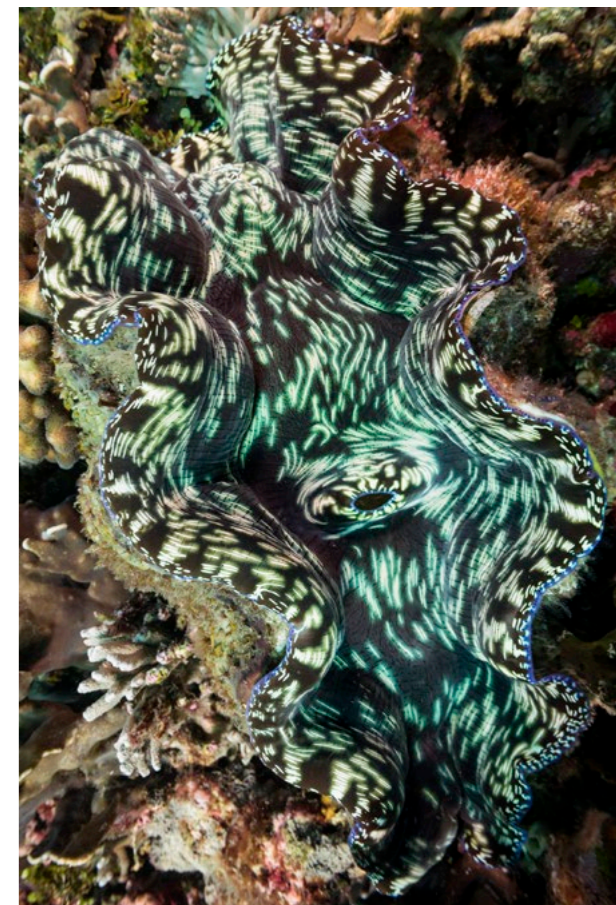
to the far eastern edge of the island to dive a spot called Pohon Miring. Dropping into the water near a handful of local fishermen in wooden canoes, we descended down a wall with massive elephant ear and barrel sponges to find a swim-through at 80ft (24m), which was lined with colorful sea fans. The current picked up as we rounded the next corner, accelerating the remainder of the dive, and we finished our safety stop secured by reef hooks in a coral garden at the



School of yellowtail fusilier fish swim above a colorful coral reef and a large, pink barrel sponge (above) at Banda Neira Island where one can see the lava flow from an eruption in 1988, extending from the top of the volcanic cinder cone into the ocean (top left).



School of ternate chromis fish swimming over a field of staghorn corals at Banda Neira Island (above); A green and black giant clam at Serua Island (right)



top of the wall.

A short distance away sits an off-shore exposed rock that was to be our second dive of the day. Known as Batu Kapal, or Ship Rock, this site has multiple underwater pinnacles, which are covered in aggregations of reef fish, sea fans, sponges, orange soft corals and large colonies of black sun corals. Following the dive, the liveboard anchored back in the harbor at Banda Neira, and we used the skiffs to access our last dive of the day.

A volcanic eruption in 1988 decimated the existing reef, as molten lava ran from the top of the cinder cone all the way down to the shoreline and into the ocean. Since that time, at a dive site now called Lava Flow, the corals have repopulated, flourished and exploded into one of

the most impressive hard coralscapes I have ever seen. We were informed that scientists are in fact studying this reef to try and discover the keys to its mind-blowing recovery in hopes of replicating the formula at other reef systems across the globe. There were immense fields of staghorn corals, incredible plate coral formations, colorful expanses of lettuce corals, large pink barrel sponges and schools of chromis swimming amongst it all.

Topside excursion

After a quick shower and rinse of the dive gear, we boarded the skiffs to transfer across the harbor for a land tour of Banda Neira. Once on land, we were met by a local tour guide who took us to a museum filled with artifacts, paintings and histori-



Panoramic aerial view of Bobooi Island off the southern tip of Saparua and the surrounding shallow coral reefs (above); Aggregation of anthias and chromis fish swimming above a hard coral reef at Nusa Laut Island (left)



cal drawings depicting life in the Banda Islands during the time of the early Dutch settlement. Sadly, the treatment of the locals was not always kind, similar to the history of other invading nations around the globe. One painting in the museum actually depicted barbaric public beheadings and dismemberments of the natives at the hands of mercenary Samurai warriors as a means to maintain power and control.

The tour continued through town and up into the hills where we witnessed the local farming of almonds, nutmeg and cloves. At the top of the hill, we came upon Fort Belgica, which was built by the Dutch in 1611 to protect their colony and also serve as a jail. The pentagon-shaped brick fortress is fully surrounded

by an additional barrier wall, which has defensible columns at each of the five corners. The fort now serves as a tourist attraction and is largely empty except for a handful of bats roosting in the sleeping quarters. On our way back through town, we shopped for spices, dried fish, fruits and pastries at various market stalls before returning to the live-aboard for an elaborate BBQ dinner of grilled chicken, pork and shrimp served on the upper deck under the stars.

Nusa Laut Island

One more overnight crossing followed, as we pulled anchor after dinner to continue the trek north back towards Ambon. Our last day of diving began in the early morning hours at Nusa Laut

Island. We dropped in at a site called Ameth to a stunning wall of corals that transitioned into a coral garden on the white sandy bottom, all of which was teeming with schools of chromis and fusiliers. The mild current was just strong enough to make for a pleasant drift dive and keep all of the reef fish swimming in unison above the corals.

Bobooi Island

A short ride later, we arrived at Bobooi Island to complete our final dive just offshore on a small, shallow coral outcropping known as Pombobooi. The site boasted similar coral structures and reef fish to our morning dive, though I was more impressed with the panoramic aerial view of the island I captured with



Olive sea snake (left) and aggregation of leopard anemones living on the skeleton of a sea fan (far left) at Serua Island

my drone.

The remainder of the afternoon was spent motoring to Ambon's harbor, where once anchored, we enjoyed a spectacular steak dinner with the guests and crew on our last night together. The evening was spent sharing stories and packing gear in preparation for the next morning's departure.

Afterthoughts

Time always goes too quickly on these adventures, and eight days disappeared into the rearview mirror far faster than seemed possible. It was an absolute privilege to have the opportunity to dive in this remote and unspoiled place, and I was very thankful to become acquainted with all the highlights of the Banda Sea, even if Mother Nature did not always provide optimal photographic opportunities—so goes the cruel irony of divers' quests for pelagic creatures and the prospect of perfect conditions with plentiful interactions that keeps us coming back. In a perfect example of the "you-should-have-been-here-last-week" scenario,

the group that came on board immediately after us jumped into clear waters with a manta ray, false killer whales and hammerhead sharks on their very first dive!

The Banda Sea is a spectacular place to explore, and I hope you get the opportunity to experience it for yourself. I am very much looking forward to a return visit. The pygmy blue whales and leatherback sea turtles are still out there waiting for us. ■

The author would like to thank Solitude Liveaboards and Resorts (Solitude.world) for hosting this excursion and the crew of the Solitude Adventurer for taking such good care of us. Thanks also go to Scubapro (scubapro.com) and Blue Abyss Photo (blueabyssphoto.com) for their assistance with underwater dive and photo gear.

Matthew Meier is a professional underwater photographer and travel writer based in San Diego, California, USA. To see more of his work and to order photo prints, please visit: matthewmeierphoto.com.



Large pink barrel sponge, elephant ear sponge and orange soft corals contrast with the bright green black sun corals at Serua Island.

fact file

Indonesia



SOURCES: US CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, CDC.GOV, STATE.TRAVEL.US, WIKIPEDIA.ORG, XE.COM

History Indonesia had been inhabited for thousands of years prior to traders from Portugal arriving in the 1500s hoping to monopolize the spice trade of nutmeg, cloves and pepper from the Banda Islands. Their efforts proved unsuccessful as more merchants from the Netherlands and Britain joined the trade routes, before ultimately, the Dutch East India Company took control in the early 1600s. The Dutch regulated the spice trade and slowly extended their grip over all of Indonesia in the following centuries. During WWII, the Japanese forcibly gained control of the archipelago and after the war, on 17 August 1945, the Indonesian people proclaimed their independence, which was not formally recognized by the Dutch until December 1949. Government: Republic. Capital: Jakarta.

Geography The Indonesian archipelago is comprised of over 17,000 islands in Southeast Asia between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Located within the archipelago, the Banda Sea is situated south of the Maluku Islands, and southeast of the island of Sulawesi. It contains dozens of volcanic islands, many of which are uninhabited and extremely remote, occupying a total area of 180,000 sq mi (470,000 sq km). The Banda Sea is

only accessible by liveboard dive boat, whose season is typically during the months of September and October, though boats will travel through the area at other times of the year. Coastline: 54,716km.

Climate The climate is tropical year-round with a rainy season from December to March and a dry season from July to September, though rain can fall any time of year. Air temperatures range from 22 to 33°C (72 to 90°F) and water temperatures range from 25 to 29°C (77 to 84°F). A 3mm or 5mm wetsuit is recommended depending on the season, as is a hooded vest.

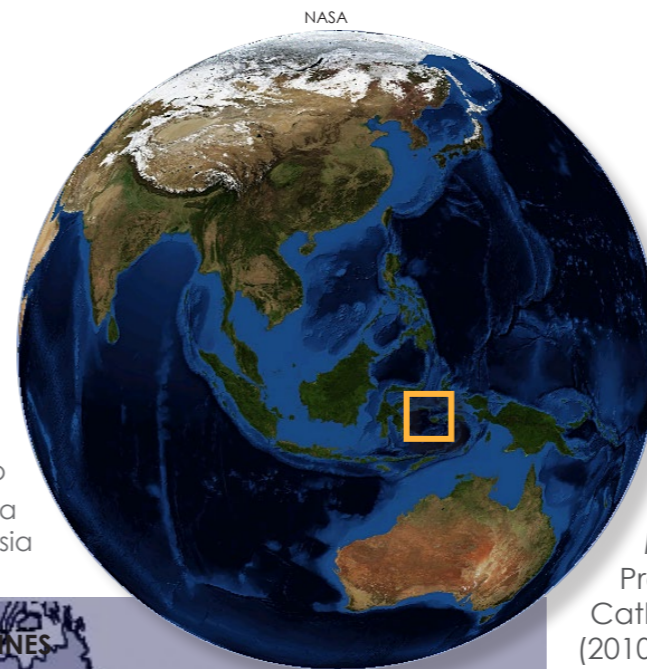
Environmental issues Challenges include heavy smog caused by wildfires associated with large-scale deforestation, which is often illegal; overfishing and exploitation of marine resources; and water pollution from industrial waste and sewage. Air pollution, traffic and management of garbage, water and

wastewater are challenges in rapidly growing urban areas.

Economy Tourism dollars from scuba diving, along with fishing and spice sales, account for the majority of income generated in the Banda islands. Also known as the Spice Islands, they once were the sole producers of the spices nutmeg and mace. Indonesia is Southeast Asia's largest economy. Challenges the country continues to face include poverty and unemployment, an infrastructure that is inadequate, corruption, complicated regulations and unequal resource distribution amongst its regions.

Currency Indonesian Rupiah (IDR). Credit cards are accepted on board and at larger hotels and resorts, but ATMs and banks are difficult to find outside of major cities. Exchange rates: 1USD=14.55IDR; 1EUR=17.14IDR; 1GBP=18.77IDR; 1AUD=10.40IDR; 1SGD=10.57IDR

Population 267,026,366 (July 2020 est.), making Indonesia the fourth largest country in the world. With a populace of only 18,544 (2010 Census), the Banda Islands accounts for a very small portion of that population. Ethnic groups: Javanese 40.1%, Sundanese 15.5%, Malay 3.7%, Batak 3.6%, Madurese 3%, Betawi 2.9%,



RIGHT: Location of Banda Sea on global map
BELOW: Location of Banda Sea on map of Indonesia



Minangkabau 2.7%, Buginese 2.7%, Bantenese 2%, Banjarese 1.7%, Balinese 1.7%, Acehnese 1.4%, Dayak 1.4%, Sasak 1.3%, Chinese 1.2% (2010 est). Religions: Muslim 87.2%, Protestant 7%, Roman Catholic 2.9%, Hindu 1.7% (2010 est). Note: Indonesia is the country with the largest population of Muslims in the world. Visitors are encouraged to respect local traditions and dress modestly. Internet users: 65,525,226 or 25.4% (July 2016 est.)

Language The official language is Bahasa Indonesia, though English, Dutch and over 700 local dialects are also spoken. English is generally spoken in tourist areas.

Voltage Electricity is 220 Volts/50 Hz and the plugs have two prongs, identical to the EU. Many resorts and liveaboards have installed universal sockets, so inquire as to whether an adaptor is needed.

Cuisine The food on board the liveaboard is a mixture of traditional Indonesian fare, Asian and international cuisine that can be tailored to meet any dietary constraints. The meals are frequent, delicious and the portions plentiful.

Tipping Tipping is expected on liveaboard dive boats and each establishment has their own guidelines and suggestions. A tip of 10 to 15 percent of the value

of your trip is generally recommended.

Health Please check with your state department or local embassy for the latest travel restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic. There is a high degree of risk for food or waterborne diseases such as bacterial diarrhoea, hepatitis A and E, and typhoid fever, as well as vectorborne diseases such as chikungunya, dengue fever and malaria. Check with the WHO or your dive operator for prophylaxis recommendations and required vaccines. Bring insect repellents containing DEET. International Certificate of Vaccination required for yellow fever if arriving from an infected area within five days.

Hyperbaric chamber The nearest chamber to the Banda Sea is in Makassar or Manado. Both are located on the island of Sulawesi and would require an evacuation by sea or air. Makassar: Rumah Sakit Umum Wahidin Sudirohusodo Tel: +62 0411 (584677) or 584675 Manado: Malalayang Hospital Tel: +62 0811 430913

Travel/Visa/Security Please check with your state department for the latest travel advisories and restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic. A passport is required for entry into Indonesia and must be valid for at least six months past your departure date. For visiting foreigners, a visa and health certificate may be required. Visa-on-arrival services may be suspended.

Websites Indonesia Travel indonesia.travel/gb/en/home