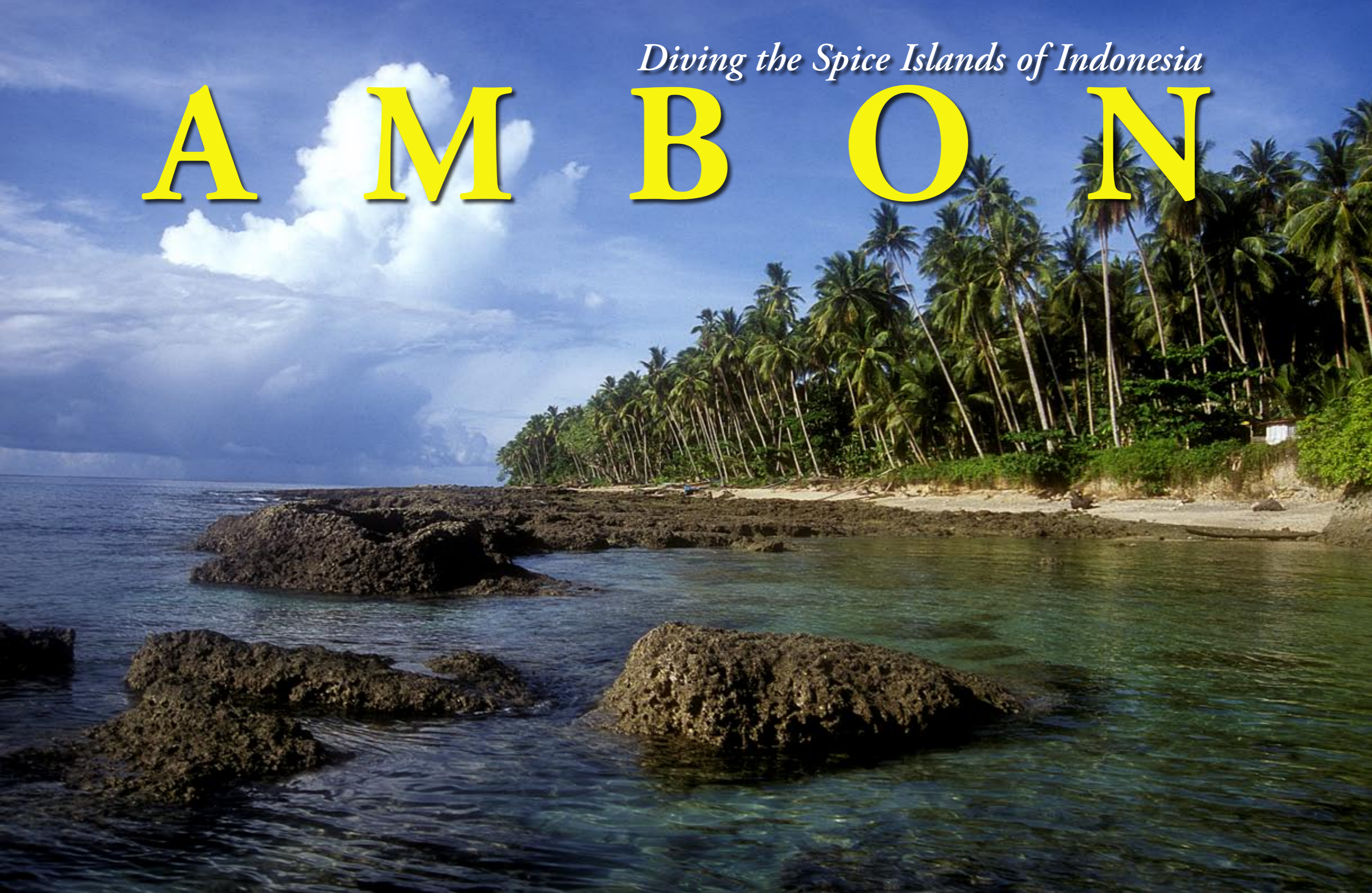


Diving the Spice Islands of Indonesia

AMBON





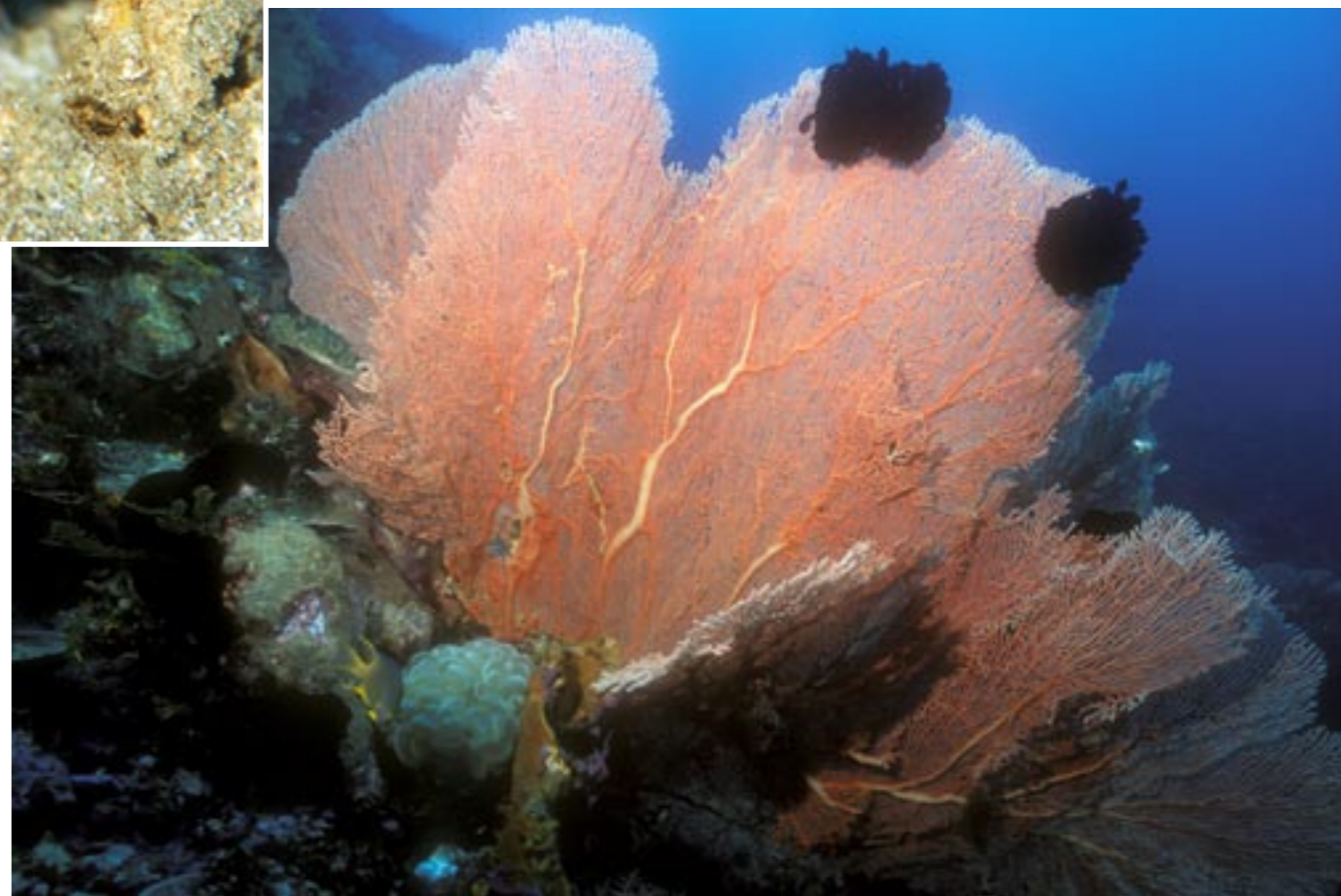
captions

Text and photos by Scott Bennett

“Have a great time, but keep your head down!” This was the response I received from a diving friend after announcing I was planning a visit to Ambon. At least he knew where it was; my announcement to friends in Toronto drew blank stares. When I mentioned the Spice Islands, a dawn of recognition crept into their eyes. It was a place they’d vaguely heard of but had no idea whatsoever as to their location.

Tucked away at the eastern end of the Indonesian archipelago, Maluku province consists of roughly 1000 islands scattered in the Banda Sea near New Guinea. Formerly known as the Moluccas during Dutch colonial times, the region has long attracted the attention of merchants, adventurers and explorers. Nowadays, it is attracting the attention of divers eager to explore its underwater treasures.

My journey began back in June



of '05 in Singapore. While attending “Celebrate the Sea”, I met Mike Hilis and John “Buck” Randolph, the owners of Unexplored Adventures. Their company is comprised of two distinct identities, Maluku Divers and Spice Island Explorers. After regaling me with tales of pristine diving, a fascinating history and a lack of tourists, I was immediately intrigued. Inevitably, the subject of the past violence came up. In 1999, tensions between Christians and Muslims flared and the resulting violence effectively put the brakes on tourism in the region for several years.

Happily though, a peace treaty was signed in 2002 and things have been

pretty quiet ever since. “There hasn’t been a westerner killed here since the Second World War!” Mike added with a grin. I was sold!

Six months later, the week before Christmas, I found myself on a packed midnight flight from Jakarta bound for Ambon. I wasn’t really sure what to expect; attempts to obtain information on the Internet were rewarded with 6-year-old stories about the unrest. Descending through the clouds my eyes were greeted with verdant islands cloaked in green. Seven flights, five stopovers and countless hours after leaving home, I touched down at Ambon’s beautiful new airport.



Spice trade history

The island region where Tim Severin and his crew will sail is known as the Spice Islands. Another name for this group is the Moluccas or Maluku. Although romantically named, the Spice Islands have a long and bloody history.

Today the importance of the Spice Islands is as one of the few surviving areas of primary tropical rainforest with a rich natural history. In previous centuries the islands' importance lay with their name. As the source of cloves and nutmeg they were the focus of attention from traders since 300 B.C. or possibly earlier. Chinese, Indian and Arab merchants sought out these riches long before the European powers came to Maluku. The Arab connection, in particular, meant that the Muslim Influence was very strong. Individual sultans amassed great wealth and came to control the precious spice trade. Indeed, by the early 1500s, Maluku was known as Jazirat-al-Muluk or "Land of Many Kings."

It was at this time that Europeans first came to the Moluccas in search of cloves and nutmeg. They were highly valued as food preservatives. Wealthy ladies used to keep spices in lockets around their necks so they could freshen their breaths easily. Gentlemen added nutmeg to food and drink. Spices were also used for medicinal purposes, especially in the relief of colic, gout and rheumatism. Such great demand meant that the prices of nutmeg and cloves soared. To offset this crisis expeditions were launched to find the source of these spices and bring them directly back to Europe.

Christopher Columbus was searching for the fabled route to the Indies when he arrived at the Americas in 1492. Not long after this the Portuguese enforced their rule on parts of the Moluccan Islands. Along with the spice traders came military forces and missionaries keen on converting the natives of the islands. Conflict soon broke out and the Portuguese brutally crushed the islanders. The natives continued to disrupt Portuguese trade and everyday life in the islands and within a century they were replaced by the Spanish. They did not last long either and lost out to the Dutch who governed the islands between 1605 and 1945.

The period of Dutch rule is marked by the usage of vast plantations as a means of producing vast quantities of spices for the European markets. All the land was under the control of the Dutch East Indies Company and anyone caught selling land, however small, was executed. By the early 1800s new plantations of spices in Africa and India meant that there was a greater choice of supply available to the traders. As a consequence, prices fell and the Dutch were in trouble. It was around this time that Alfred Russel Wallace arrived in the Malay Archipelago.

Today, the Spice Islands make up Maluku Propinsi (or Maluku Province) of the Republic of Indonesia. SOURCE: <http://www.iol.ie/~spice/Indones.htm>



ABOVE: Cloves and spices. INSET: Nutmeg

Normally, the transfer to the resort is made by a 15-minute boat ride, but due to rough weather the previous evening, they opted to pick me up by car instead. One hour after leaving the airport, I had finally arrived at the dive shop! Located in Latuhalat, on the southwestern corner of the island, the resort is nestled across the road from the beach. Out front, the azure waters of the Banda Sea stretched out towards the horizon. Just off the beach, expanses of jagged volcanic rock could be seen offshore during low tide, contrasting sharply with the lush forest-clad hills lining the shore.

Opening in July of 2005, Maluku Divers works closely with the local community. All 14 members of the professional, well-trained staff are from the surrounding area, including dive guides Toby and Nus. In fact, Toby is something of a celebrity. During his working stint in Manado, he discovered a new species of pygmy seahorse that was named after him!

After a virtually sleepless night on airplanes and still burdened with jet lag, I decided to take it easy on the first day. Over breakfast, I asked Buck about some of the things that had been seen that week. Upon hearing the magic words harlequin



Ambon

shrimp and rhinopias, my eyes instantly lit up like a Christmas tree! I also had a chat with three guests who had arrived from Singapore a few days earlier. After hearing their enthusiastic accounts of the diving, I was beginning to wonder if the rest day was a bad idea...

Muck diving

Early the next morning, with visions of harlequin shrimps and rhinopias dancing in my head, we headed out across Ambon Bay. At first, we seemed to be headed straight for the airport. I mistakenly assumed we were on our way to pick up some more guests before the dive! We soon anchored a few metres from shore near a concrete jetty, with an array of fishing boats providing a colourful backdrop. Underwater, my eyes were greeted with a barren, rubble-strewn slope descending down to 22m. While seemingly devoid of life, there was more here than meets the eye; for this was Laha, Ambon's premier muck-diving site.

Within moments of entering the water, the critters



started coming fast and furious. The stony bottom provided the perfect habitat for snake eels. Along with the more familiar crocodile and Bonaparte's species was another variety with a massive, grey head. Underneath the muffled roar of the fishing boats, the slope was home to a collection of seahorses in colours of yellow, orange and chocolate brown.

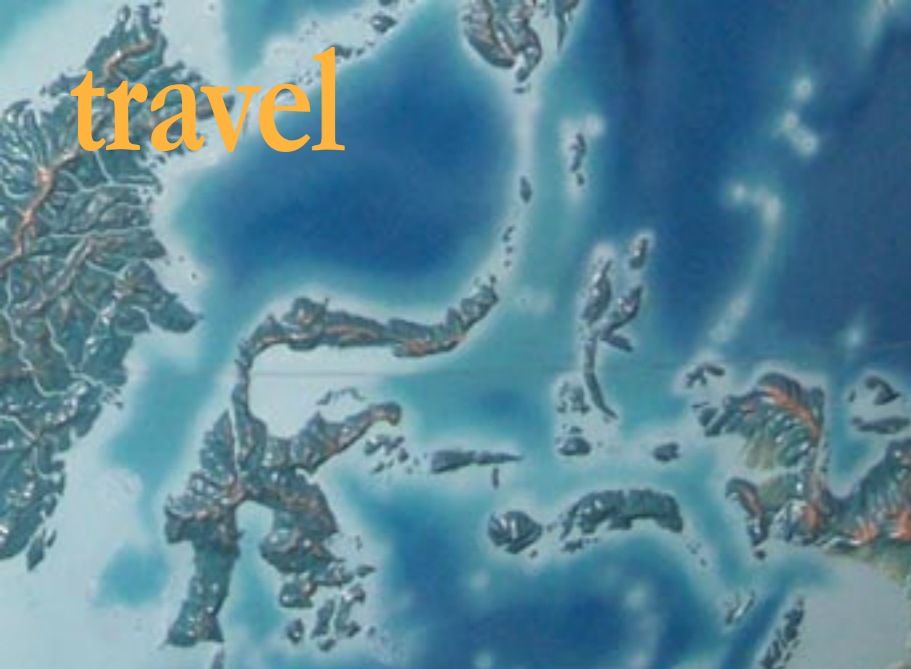
Care had to be taken however, as the entire area was crawling with scorpionfish; devil scorpionfish, Ambon scorpionfish and false stonefish mingled with pygmy lionfish in colour phases of red, copper and yellow. The critter parade continued; during the next 50 minutes, we saw hingebeak shrimp, emperor shrimps on sea cucumbers, cowfish, morays and flying gurnards. During our safety stop, we came across an enormous cluster of urchins. Many creatures could be seen hiding among and adjacent to the protective spines, including blue-eyed cardinalfish, banded pipefish, leaf scorpionfish, dragonets, nudibranchs and a pair of giant frogfish, one green and the other black.

Back on the boat, I was grinning ear to ear! However, Toby looked rather sad, as he had searched in vain for the elusive harlequin shrimps. He came to the unfortunate conclusion that the hapless creatures had



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:





Ambon

met their demise courtesy of a hungry eel. Poor Toby was so upset, he wanted to spear every eel in the vicinity and cook them all for dinner!

Laha 2

For our second dive, we motored over the other side of the jetty, but a bit further out in the bay to Laha 2. Descending to 17m, the terrain here was noticeably different. In contrast to Laha 1, rocky outcrops accented with coral growth were dispersed across the sandy slope. While the elusive rhinopias didn't make an appearance, there were plenty of other fascinating subjects on hand. Jawfish were everywhere; their dark blue faces, punctuated with gold eyebrows, peered out at us from their protective burrows. Toby beckoned me over to show me an unusual fish with a red head and blue body sitting on the sand. He later told me it was a jawfish, but unlike any I'd seen before.

Subsequent visits over the next ten days revealed a mind-boggling assortment of critters, including flamboyant cuttlefish, stargazers, blennies, cockatoo waspfish and frogfish in a rainbow of colours.

At the end of my last dive at Laha, Toby brought me a real treat. Balanced precariously between two metal rods, was a jewel-like red and white fire urchin. Perched on top were four zebra crabs and a pair of Coleman shrimp! I photographed to my heart's content until my air was nearly gone. Then, Toby gingerly picked it up and carried it back to its original position further down the slope. I could have easily spent my entire trip diving this site alone!

Pristine diving

Ambon, along with the neighbouring islands of Haruku, Saparua, and Nusa Laut, are blessed with literally hundreds of dive sites. Unlike in some other parts of Indonesia, dynamite and cyanide fishing are virtually unknown here and the reefs are healthy and thriving. A wide variety of superb locations are within a 20-minute speedboat ride from Maluku Divers. Nus Point features a slope dropping down to large bommie at 32m. An early morning dive here is good for



Muluku

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sighting blacktip reef sharks, along with Napoleon wrasse and turtles. Higher up is another bommie with luxuriant coral growth and lots of reef fish.

Nearby Mahai has a nice wall descending down to 37m. Abundant coral growth is found here, including tubastreas and some big fan corals at 24m. In the shallows, the bottom is carpeted with a luxuriant meadow of golden-hued hydroids. Look but don't touch! Above, waves could be seen crashing along the rocky shoreline, while sunbeams added a magical touch.

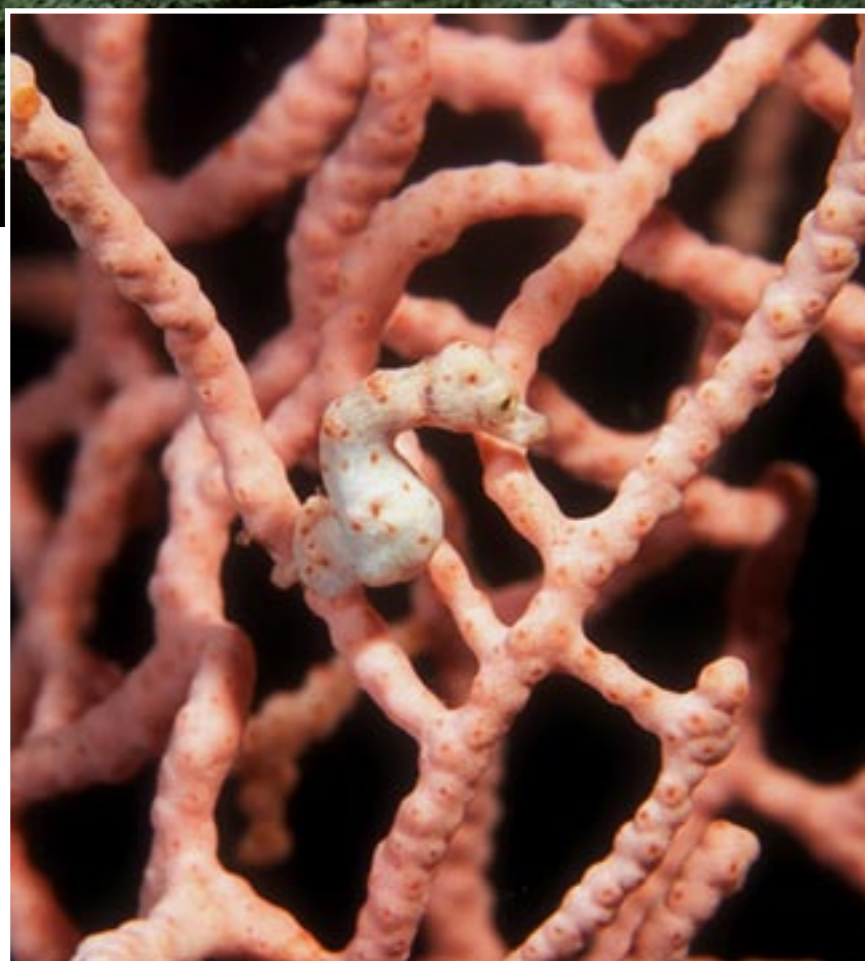
Without a doubt, one of Ambon's crown jewels is Pintu Kota. On the shoreline, a natural archway, created by continuous erosion, spread above the water, along with a number of caves

etched into the rock face. The surface currents here can be absolutely fierce! On one dive, it took a monumental effort to pull myself along the rope at the side of the boat in order to reach the mooring line. I was nearly out of breath and I had yet to descend! Fortunately, the current diminished noticeably by the time we reached the bottom. The rugged landscape along the shoreline continued underwater, with the centrepiece being a magnificent underwater arch mirroring the one on the surface. Underneath, surgeonfish and yellowtail fusiliers congregated in large numbers. Descending further, we headed to a vantage point on the other side of the arch. The waters beyond are susceptible to strong currents, making it a magnet for big fish.

Napoleon wrasses were quite prolific, along with large numbers of Oriental and harlequin sweetlips. On occasion, mantas can be found frolicking in the current. The visibility was superb, extending to approximately 35m. It was so clear in fact, that even at a depth of 32m, colours were still plainly visible. While enthralled by the show before me, I heard the frenetic banging of tank somewhere in the distance. I found out later that four big Napoleons were posing together right in front of Buck and he was frantically trying to get my attention!

Before I knew it, deco reared its ugly head. Ascending to the shallower water inside the arch, I sat down before a large fan coral and waited. Before long, the curious surgeonfish came in





close to check me out. From a depth of 12m and up, spectacular swathes of coral decorated the rugged terrain. A glittering mosaic of fish billowed amongst them, including cardinalfish, Moorish idols, butterflyfish, fusiliers and lionfish.

At nearby Hukurila Cave, Buck had something special to show me. Descending through an opening reminiscent of a big chimney, we descended to a 24m. The site isn't really a cave but more of an enormous swim-through. The bottom had a healthy abundance of corals and barrel sponges. However, it was one particular fan coral that Buck wanted to



show me. In it was a tiny pygmy seahorse. I marvelled as to how they even found it in the first place, as it was smaller than my baby fingernail. Even more remarkable was its colour. This specimen was white with minute red spots!

A Spicy History

Despite the lack of tourists, a human presence has been in these islands for 1000 years. However, it wasn't the idyllic beaches or swaying coconut palms that attracted the first visitors. These are the fabled Spice Islands, home to some of the most hotly contested commodities in history: cloves, nutmeg and mace. Though native to the region, cloves were originally discovered on the islands of Ternate and Tidore located off Halmahera. Nutmeg and mace (the lacy red aril that surrounds the nutmeg seed) originated from the two small islands of Run and Ali, located south of Ambon in the Banda Sea.

The Banda people, the islands' original inhabitants, once traded extensively with India and possibly even China and Africa. Arab spice merchants arrived around the 9th century AD,

setting up a trade monopoly with the Moluccas that spawned sultanates and mini empires throughout the archipelago. For five hundred years, the Arabs held a monopoly on the spice trade and kept the location a closely guarded secret. It was the Arab traders that introduced nutmeg to the European palate, a move that ultimately sealed their commercial doom. It was only after Vasco de Gama successfully rounded the horn of Africa that the way was paved for European explorers to try and locate the source of the fragrant treasure. The race was on!

The Portuguese were the first to arrive. In the 16th century, the 18 survivors of Magellan's original expedition of 230 aboard the Victoria (Magellan himself was killed in the Philippines) returned to Spain with over a ton of cloves. Not only was this precious cargo enough to eradicate the Spanish monarchy's looming debt, it made the sailors wealthy for life.

The Spanish eventually wrestled control from the Portuguese, only to lose their holdings to the Dutch, who founded the Dutch East India Company. Cloves were planted on Ambon, which subsequently became the centre of the region's spice trade. The company was all-powerful, and controlled the region with brutal efficiency. Harsh laws were enacted, including the death penalty for the illegal possession of nutmeg.

The Dutch monopoly came to an end courtesy of a shrewd Frenchman by the name of Pierre Poivre. In a cunning move, Poivre (Latin for pepper) managed to sneak out a handful of nutmeg fruits preserved in brine. Hence, Peter Piper and his pickled peppers!

Within eight years, nutmeg trees were growing in Mauritius and the importance

of the Spice Islands waned. Today, more nutmeg is grown in Grenada in the Caribbean and more cloves in neighbouring Sulawesi. It's hard to believe these tiny spices, common in any modern supermarket, had so much impact on world history.

Tanjung Sial

One day, we made a very special trip. As the first blush of dawn kissed the horizon, we set out for the 90-minute trip to Seram. Fisherman perched on rocky outcrops, while children waved joyfully as we passed by. The northern portion of the island is predominantly Muslim, with the shiny domes of mosques accenting the villages fringing the shoreline.

The first site of the morning was Tanjung Sial, situated at the extreme southwestern tip of Seram Island. Translated as Bad Luck Point in the local dialect, it's aptly named, as many boats have been lost here due to the fierce currents that converge off shore. As the boat couldn't anchor too close to the point due to the currents, we would have to swim along the wall just offshore to reach our destination. This was one seriously vertical wall! The sheer sides, plunging down to the depths, were practically devoid of growth. The current started to pick up as we approached the point. Along the way, a school of around 20 bumphead parrotfish passed by overhead. By this time, the wall had transformed into a slope and coral growth appeared. Sheltered areas provided a respite from the strong currents. A few more bumpheads made an appearance; the big fish were shy though and fled if you got too close. A hawksbill turtle was more compliant, however, and posed for my camera.

Towards the end of the dive, Toby swam over to check on my air. As I was getting low and we had to do our safety stop in open water, he indicated for me to follow him up. I inflated my BCD, but nothing seemed to be happening. It was then I realized that a very strong down current was pulling me down. A lot of inflation was required before I was able to ascend. After the safety stop, I realized we had surfaced in the midst of a mini-whirlpool! Fortunately, we got out of it pretty quickly and, by the time the boat picked us up, we were some distance from shore.

Our surface interval was made at a beautiful white beach on Seram Island. Seram is much bigger than Ambon but has a fraction of its population. The wild interior is cloaked with extensive tropical rainforest with many species of parrots. After making a second dive at Tanjung Sial, we headed back towards Ambon and the island of Pulau Tiga where we had our surface interval and lunch.

Pulau Tiga

While not the location from the Survivor TV show, this Pulau Tiga was truly a world-class site! Upon descending to 24m, a short swim led to the edge of a large drop-off. After taking a seat on a barren section of the slope, we sat back and watched the show unfold. This site could easily be renamed the fishbowl, as an endless procession of species paraded by. A large school of surgeonfish was joined by fusiliers, bannerfish, long-nosed emperors, blue-fin trevally, Napoleon wrasse and a few bumphead parrotfish. Giant trevallies have also been sighted here.

I could have easily spent the entire hour right on that spot, but my computer

had other ideas. Reluctantly, I headed for shallower water. The dive would have been impressive enough already, but the sights kept on coming. The slope was shrouded with a riot of corals bursting with colour. Cauliflower corals competed for space with profusion of multi-coloured fan corals and large barrel sponges. Tuna patrolled overhead, while the occasional turtle swam by out in the blue.

The site is also home to some super-sized groupers. Buck related a story of one of his encounters. On one occasion, he had been intently studying a nudibranch, when he turned around and found himself face-to-face with behemoth nearly four metres long, with a mouth wide enough to swallow a man's head! "It was the most terrified I've ever been in over 20 years of diving," related Buck. However, the big fish meant him no harm; it was merely curious. After a few moments, it swam away, leaving the shaken diver staring in awe!

Island Cuisine & Culture

That evening, a farewell party was arranged for the Singaporeans for their final night in Ambon. A traditional Ambonese dinner was prepared, starting off with some incredibly fresh tuna sashimi. The main courses followed, including koho koho (tuna salad), ikan bakar (smoked tuna), cholo cholo (dipping sauce with tomato and spices) along with side dishes of sweet potatoes, manioc and boiled bananas. Traditional Mollucan cuisine is quite healthy, as no oil is used in the preparation of the various dishes.

After dinner, we were treated to music. A lot of the staff joined in to perform some traditional Ambonese songs. Everyone sang very well, with terrific harmony. Ambon is the musical heartland of

Indonesia and Ambonese musicians are held in very high regard.

Before I knew it, Christmas Day had arrived. As a majority of the staff is Christian, they had the day off. After a late breakfast of nasi goreng, John, Alia and I strolled over to the local Protestant church. The voices of several hundred parishioners flowed out, along with the strains of a charmingly out-of-tune brass band playing hymns. Built in 1984, the church can seat 704 worshippers at a time. The ornately carved wooden chairs were fashioned in Jepara in Central Java, an area famous for its teak carving. All were donated by individuals, some as far away as Amsterdam. As the service concluded, throngs of people streamed outside, everyone dressed in their finest for the service.

We wandered inside, where we met the minister. A jovial man, he said it didn't matter whether you were Christian, Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu; the important this was to be a good Christian, Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu. "It doesn't matter what religion you follow, as long as you follow the essence of it." Well put. Initially, I thought this would be a rest day due to the holiday. Luck prevailed in the afternoon, however, as Buck managed to secure a boatman. Nus also agreed to come along. I finally got to fulfill a long-time dream: to go diving on Christmas Day!

Wreck diving

All week, Buck had been raving about a great wreck he wanted me to see. Located in the bay across from Ambon town, it is the remains of a Dutch cargo ship sunk during WW11. While details remain sketchy, it is believed to have been deliberately sunk by the Dutch to

keep it out of Japanese hands. It is also BIG, being around 100m in length. Resting on a slope, the stern lies in shallower water, with the uppermost portions rising to 12m. The fore deck is at a depth of 32m, so bottom time can end up being relatively short.

Marking the site was a huge rusty mooring platform. There was no current as we made our descent down the mooring line. The imposing silhouette of the vessel soon became perceptible in the gloom. While visibility can range anywhere from 6-15m, it was definitely on the lower end of the scale. Despite being encrusted with all manner of growth, the vessel's features were still recognizable. Abundant tubastrea corals branched outwards from the sides. Numerous clusters of bubble corals carpeted the upper deck, while yellow and blue tunicates added splashes of colour. Prolific fish life congregates around the wreck, including large numbers of yellow snappers and big-eye trevally. A trio of eagle rays are also known to frequent the vicinity, but are shy and usually vanish at the appearance of divers.

The wreck is equally fascinating to macro enthusiasts. Within moments of our descent, Nus pointed out a perfectly camouflaged orange frogfish perched on top of a pipe. The vessel's surface is riddled with nooks and crannies, providing home to a myriad of frogfish of all sizes and colours. Also present in great numbers are some very large and well-camouflaged scorpionfish. At one point, while trying to take a photo, I nearly put my hand on one! The upper deck is home to some very large nudibranchs, peacock mantis shrimps, blennies and vivid purple tubeworms. Barramundi cod, uncommon in many other areas, were also abundant.

As the wreck is so large, it is impossible to see everything on one dive. Many dives are needed to appreciate all the site has to offer. The wreck is also penetrable and quite suitable for novices.

Night diving

For superlative night dives, the resort's own house reef can't be beat! Literally right across the road from the dive shop, just off the beach, it consists of a sandy bottom with huge rocky outcrops festooned with coral, sponges and tunicates.

This is the home of big macro! Crustaceans are particularly abundant here. The numerous crevices and overhangs along the walls provide refuge for spiny lobsters. Along with the adults were some colourful juveniles with their blue and white tails and white antennae. Slipper lobsters were also common, including the biggest specimen I've ever seen. It must have been close to a metre long!

The walls were literally crawling with crabs; spider crabs, orang-utan crabs, coral crabs, decorator crabs and sponge crabs. On several occasions we found a lumpy asternodotis, a huge tan-coloured nudibranch looking like a bumpy brown pancake with gills.

Each dive revealed a fascinating assortment of subjects, including ornate ghost pipefish,

flounders, a minute juvenile leaf scorpionfish, Pegasus seamoths, nudibranchs and flatworms. Every day, on the same spot on the wall, sat a beautiful little clown frogfish. On my last night dive, with one more shot left on the camera, he yawned for me!

Background

One a delicious Christmas dinner of soto ayam (Indonesian chicken soup), I asked Buck how he came to be in Ambon. A helicopter pilot by profession, he has flown humanitarian and search-and-rescue missions around the world, providing aid to victims of plane crashes, sinking ships, war zones and natural disasters, including the Asian Tsunami. While flying in food and supplies during the Ambon conflict, he immediately became enthralled with the island's people and history. Wanting to do something to help, he teamed up with long-time friend Mike Hillis and Unexplored Adventures was born.

The guys have big plans in the works. A brand-new resort is currently being developed a short 10-minute tricycle ride from the dive shop. Located right on the water, the resort will feature several cottages, a restaurant and a spa surrounded by tropical gardens. All palm trees will be left standing, with the resort being

constructed around them. The cottages are being prefabricated off-site and will be furnished in a traditional Mollucan style.

The property also comes with some interesting historical relics. Along with the remnants of a trench, three Japanese bunkers are found along the shore. During the Second World War, Ambon was the scene of heavy fighting between Japanese and Australian forces. The Japanese constructed numerous trenches and bunkers all along the coast, many of which can still be seen today.

On my last afternoon, Buck took me for a tour of the surrounding area. In the hills above Ambon City, a picturesque and very winding road lead to Soya village. As we ascended higher, the heady aroma of cloves permeated the air. At various points along the roadside were sheets, each covered with the freshly harvested buds drying in the hot, tropical sun.

Arriving in Soya, we paid a visit to the village head and made a small donation. As this was the end of the road, we had to walk. After climbing many steps, we reached an area with a number of clove trees. Up here, the fragrant aroma of the ripening buds was even stronger. Also present, a short distance away, were some nutmeg trees. Unlike the cloves, the round, pale green fruits

were not quite ripe. It's hard to believe these unassuming trees played such a major part in word history.

Afterwards, we headed back down to Ambon City. Lunch was at the aptly named Panorama café, which provided expansive views over the city. Sprawling along the meandering hillsides above Ambon Bay, Maluku's capital is home to over 200,00 people and is one of the largest cities in the entire region. Things are pretty quiet these days, although a few blocks in the downtown core still bear scars from the conflict. The wide streets are lined with many churches, including an impressive Catholic cathedral. The people are friendly and cheerful greetings of "Hello mister!" are a common occurrence. Tourists, especially Westerners, are a rarity and the locals are genuinely happy to see them.

Final thoughts

For my last dive, John asked me where I would like to go. That was a no-brainer; it had to be Pulau Tiga! While no Napoleons showed up, the fish life was even more prolific than on our previous visit. Towards the end of the dive, I spied something gleaming atop a bed of coral. It was the reef hook one of the guests had lost four days earlier. I was surprised

that no one else had scooped it up. Then it suddenly dawned on me; no one else had been here since! Here was a world-class dive site and we had it all to ourselves.

In the mid 1800s, the famous English naturalist Alfred Russell Wallace declared, "The species of fishes in Maluku are perhaps unrivalled for variety and beauty by those of any one spot on earth." I wholeheartedly agree!

Getting there

While seemingly far-flung, reaching Ambon is surprisingly easy. Up to four flights a day arrive from Jakarta, Makassar or Bali. Lion Air allows an extra weight allowance of 30kg for diving equipment. For those with limited time, a convenient red-eye departs Jakarta at midnight and arrives in Ambon at 7:00AM. This is a very convenient flight, as the early arrival means you can be geared up and in the water after breakfast.

If you are arriving from Singapore and connecting right away, be sure to get some rupiah before departing. I paid for my Indonesian visa on arrival (\$25.00US) and was given dollars for change. On hand to meet me was a representative from Unexplored Adventures who gave

me my plane tickets for Ambon.

After rushing over to the domestic terminal to connect, I was hit with excess baggage fees (the curse of being a photographer) and they wouldn't take dollars. After somewhat heated negotiations and help from my driver, they finally relented and I made a mad dash for the plane. Fortunately, they were holding it for me and I made it in the nick of time! Indonesian domestic flights are much more expensive to book outside the country. Mike booked my flight for me and had someone meet me on arrival to give me my tickets and drive me to the domestic terminal.

Scott Bennett is an underwater photographer and writer based in Toronto, Canada. For more information or to order prints, visit his website at: www.benepix.com ■

fact file



Ambon, Indonesia



History Aboriginal settlers arrived on the continent from Southeast Asia about 40,000 years before the first Europeans began exploration in the 17th century. No formal claims were made until 1770, when Capt. James COOK took possession in the name of Great Britain. Six colonies were created in the late 18th and 19th centuries; they federated and became the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901. The new country was able to take advantage of its natural resources in order to rapidly develop its agricultural and manufacturing industries and to make a major contribution to the British effort in World Wars I and II. Long-term concerns include pollution, particularly depletion of the ozone layer, and management and conservation of coastal areas, especially the Great Barrier Reef. A referendum to change Australia's status, from a commonwealth headed by the British monarch to a republic, was defeated in 1999.

Geography Tasmania covers a land area of 68,332 sq km (26,383 sq. miles). Its terrain ranges from mountains, lakes, rivers and waterfalls to dense rain forest. Tasmania has over 2000 km of walking tracks and 18 national parks. The Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area covers 1.38 million hectares.

Climate Of all the Australian capital cities, Hobart has the nation's second-

lowest rainfall (626 mm or 24 inches). The average summer temperature is 21°C (70°F). Winter's average is 12°C (52°F).

Population The population of Tasmania is 472,000. Main centers are Hobart (the capital city with 195,500 people) Launceston (98,500) Burnie (18,000) and Devonport (25,000).

Currency Australian Dollar (AUD\$)

Language English

Diving Colorful sponges, anemones, lots of seaweed including giant kelp forests. Dive comfortably all year in a 7mm wet suit.

Electricity 220-240V AC, 50 Hz. Plugs have three flat pins. A socket converter can be bought for approximately \$8-10 AUD.

Web sites

Tasmania Tourism
www.discovertasmania.com.au
Port Arthur Region
www.portarthur-region.com.au

Dive Operators

Eaglehawk Dive Centre
www.eaglehawkdive.com.au

