



Mating mandarinfish under the jetty

Sponges & coral on the reefs

Black and white banded sea snake

Diver on the reefs of the Banda Islands

+ JUST OVER 350 YEARS AGO A SMALL AND REMOTE ISLAND IN INDONESIA'S MOLUCCAS GROUP WAS SO VALUABLE IT WAS EXCHANGED FOR NEW YORK'S MANHATTAN ISLAND. OFTEN REFERRED TO AS THE 'SPICE ISLANDS'. THE MOLUCCAS WERE THE SOURCE OF INCREDIBLY VALUABLE NUTMEG, MACE, CLOVES AND CINNAMON THAT WERE IN HUGE DEMAND IN EUROPE UNTIL THE LATE 18TH CENTURY.

: DON SILCOCK

[www.indopacificimages.com](http://www.indopacificimages.com)



Banded sea snake at Gunning Api

Spices from the Moluccas had trickled into Europe during the middle ages and became popular among the wealthy as a way to make poorly preserved meat taste better. Spices were also perceived to give protection against the deadly plagues that regularly ravaged Europe. The rise of the Republic of Venice in the 12th century and its control of key Mediterranean seaways allowed it to dominate European trade and monopolize the spice trade for the next 300 years. Armed and dangerous Arabic traders controlled the incredibly lucrative 'land route' by which the spices crossed the Arabian Peninsula to the Mediterranean Sea. The Venetians and their Arabic trading partners kept the flow of these precious spices, literally worth their weight in gold, at a low level which hugely inflated prices and profit margins. The Arabs also sustained a deep and lasting mystique about the source of the spices and the Spice Islands themselves to confuse and intimidate potential rivals. A great example of their disinformation was the widely circulated legend that cinnamon was found only on a mountain range deep in the heart of Arabia and jealously guarded by vicious birds of prey. The birds supposedly made their nests from the cinnamon high on the steep mountain slopes and the only

way to collect cinnamon was to leave out large chunks of fresh donkey meat for the birds to carry back to their nests. The weight of the donkey meat made the nests crash to the ground then the brave Arabs would risk their lives to grab the nests from under the talons of the angry birds!

The rise of the Turkish Ottoman Empire and the seizure of Constantinople in 1453 ultimately led to the closure of the land route and ended the profitable monopoly. This triggered the 'age of exploration' – a 200 year period when the major European powers sent sailing ships to find and control the source of the spices. Columbus was seeking the legendary Spice Islands when he discovered the New World of the Americas; Ferdinand Magellan's expedition circumnavigated the world for the first time and Vasco Da Gama rounded Africa's Cape of Good Hope and established the sea route to the Indian sub-continent.

The Portuguese were the first to reach the Mollucas and seize control of the spice trade, using the immense profits to finance their plans for a global colonial empire. But in 1599 the Dutch arrived with bigger and better ships, guns and

financial backing – within a year they'd established total and brutal control over the area and ruled from their main base in Batavia, now called Jakarta.

The Dutch East Indies Company was eventually rivalled by the British East Indies Company and the two companies engaged in a protracted struggle for control of the spice trade. During this conflict the British claimed and occupied the tiny Banda island of Run where nutmeg trees grew in abundance. Hostilities eventually ended with the Treaty of Breda in 1667, but so determined were the Dutch to regain Run and its nutmeg trees that they agreed to relinquish control of the island of New Amsterdam in the New World to the British. New Amsterdam is now known as New York's Manhattan Island.

**My Journey to the Banda Islands**

The story of the Spice Islands and the rich history of the Banda Islands greatly appealed to my sense of adventure, but it's not exactly the easiest place in the world to reach. I wanted to see what was underwater in the Banda Sea plus the islands themselves and it took two trips before I fully realized my goal. The first was in September 2006 on the SMY *Ondina*, a pinisi style schooner built and

# A TOUCH OF SPICE!

managed by Spanish adventurer Ricard Buxo. The journey started in Maumere on the island of Flores in the Lesser Sunda Islands. We dived various locations as we headed east to Alor, before turning northeast into the Banda Sea and the fabled Banda Islands.

**Gunning Api - Fire Mountain or Snake Island?**

We were to sail overnight from Alor to Gunung Api volcano, which rises from the 4000 metre depths of the Banda Sea and provides the only shelter enroute to the Banda Islands. Gunung Api actually means 'fire mountain', the generic Indonesian name for volcano, but it should be called Snake Island because it's literally inundated with sea snakes. I'd heard stories of 'snake balls' here – writhing masses of sea snakes that congregate into small caves on the north and northeast sides of the volcano and was really looking forward to seeing them. But bad weather hit on the way north, so we had to anchor and dive the sheltered southern part of the volcano, so we missed the famous snake balls!

But we did see lots of snakes, both banded and olive green – everywhere!

Though their venom is said to be extremely poisonous, their mouths are so small that even if they wanted to bite you they'd have to do so on say the flap of skin between the thumb and forefinger or maybe your earlobe. Anywhere else is literally too much of a mouthful. Wrapped in neoprene, divers are basically fire-wall protected from the snakes, but you'd have to do something pretty stupid to provoke an attack in the first place. The snakes aren't aggressive and allow you to hold them if you do it gently and let go as soon as you feel them tensing up – a sure sign they need air and feel they are being restricted from rising to the surface to fill their lungs.

The weather was deteriorating and Ricard warned us that we were in for a rough journey to the Bandas. It took another day and a half in big seas before we entered the huge bay separating northern and southern Ambon, and forms the superb and sheltered natural harbour.

**Diving the Banda Islands**

It was from this same harbour that I again departed for the Banda Islands in April 2007 on the same boat. Our route initially took us along the north to dive



Large seawhip on the Banda Islands

the western tip of Ambon Island and then down the north coast and the Lease Islands of Haruku, Saparua and Nusa Laut.

The village of Ameth on the northeast tip of Nusa Laut is a truly great example of what can be done to manage natural resources, such as the reef located just in front of the village. Many of the best dive spots on Haruku and Saparua have been devastated by Indonesia's dynamite fishing scourge, which not only wipes out all the fish and their habitat but prevents regrowth of the reef. The villagers of Ameth have not only realised the long term impact of dynamite fishing, they clearly understand that a healthy thriving reef is more valuable

than one that's been degraded by blasts of dynamite. Permission must be obtained from the village before diving the reef and *Ondina* willingly pays a small fee per diver to the village. Akoon further south of Ameth has adopted the same policy and its reef is equally healthy and vibrant. I had two tremendous dives on the reef at Ameth and two similar dives at Akoon and surfaced thinking that 20 to 30 years ago most of the reefs in Indonesia must have been like that – pristine and thriving, with healthy corals and abundant reef fish!

From Nusa Laut we sailed southeast overnight and arrived early the next day at the main island of Banda Naira which lies in the shadow of the currently dormant volcano, also called Gunung Api. This time the weather was kind to us –we had clear blue skies and picturesque cumulus clouds, a superb backdrop for these photogenic islands.

Over the next three days we did 12 dives on the best Banda locations – Hatta Island, Hatta Reef, Ai Island, Batu Kapal Island, Banda Besar Island and the jetty in Banda Naira.

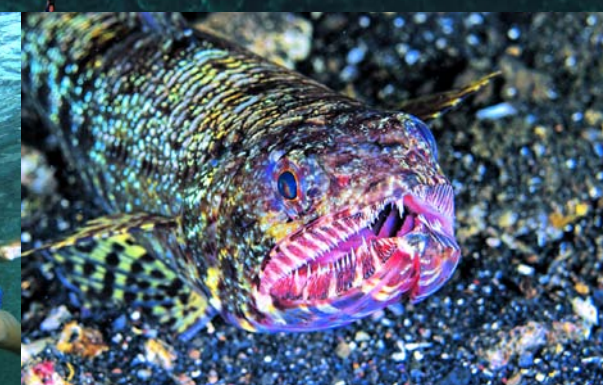
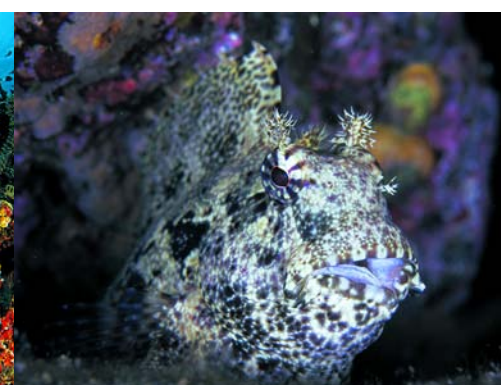
Three areas stand out from the others – Hatta and Ai Islands for their vibrant deep blue waters, stunning walls, huge barrel sponges and healthy corals. Banda Naira jetty on the other hand is a muck dive reputed to be the best mandarin fish site in the world.

Hatta's walls were possibly the better of the two and I really enjoyed diving there around the middle of the day when the sun was overhead and its rays penetrated through the blue

**dive report: the spice islands°**



Ricard Buxo demonstrates his snake charming skills at Gunning Api



Left to right: Divers entering a cave; Banded sea snake at Gunning Api in the middle of the Banda Sea; The beautiful reefs of the Banda Islands; Highfin fang blenny at night under the jetty in Banda Naira harbour; Village kids pose in their best home made swim goggles; Lizard fish at night in Banda Naira harbour

Covering a land area of only 17 square miles and located a few degrees south of the equator in the sea of the same name, the Bandas are so small they're tiny specks on most maps. The cluster of 13 islands are actually the tips of volcanic peaks rising nearly 2800 metres from the seabed. So deep are parts of the Banda Sea that scientists refer to it as a 'psychrosphere' – a mass of water permanently bordering on freezing. Physically located just over 80 miles southeast of Ambon is the capital of Maluku Province, as the Moluccas are now known.



## dive report: the spice islands°

water, providing superb negative space as I framed and photographed the sponges & corals that grow in such profusion.

Banda Naira jetty certainly lived up to its reputation for mandarinfish! These superb but elusive beauties are a type of dragonet and are extremely hard to photograph as they like to live in rubble and are constantly on the move hunting for small crustaceans. They never seem to stay still for more than a few seconds, but every day at dusk they come out to mate. I've seen this before in various locations but have never been able to get a decent image of even a singular mandarinfish, let alone a highly prized pair during mating, when for about 10 minutes at dusk, they leave the rubble and rise up into the open water.

Just to the left of the jetty at Banda Naira in front of the Hotel Maulana about seven metres down is an area about 20 metres long where a large number of rectangular concrete posts have been dumped to reinforce the harbour wall. Living amongst these posts are the largest and least shy group of mandarins I've ever seen and right on cue at dusk the mating goes off in sensational style worthy of a Roman orgy!

To make things even better, it's possible to hop off the dive tender in full wet suit and be served a cold Bintang beer without the waiter even batting an eyelid!

### GETTING THERE

If you are considering a trip to the Banda Sea, I recommend taking the northern route from Ambon. You'll miss the snakes at Gunung Api, but it greatly reduces exposure to the open waters of the Banda Sea. Ambon is well served with up to four flights a day, either from Jakarta, Makassar or Bali. It's possible to travel by ferry or light airplane to the main island of Banda Naira. The sea journey takes about eight hours, compared to the one hour flight.

### BAGGAGE

I had no problem with excess baggage charges even though I was way over the 20kg limit.

### VISAS

A visa is required for Indonesia.

### MONEY

It's best to change a few hundred dollars at the airport on arrival as credit cards aren't generally accepted except in major hotels.

### SAFETY

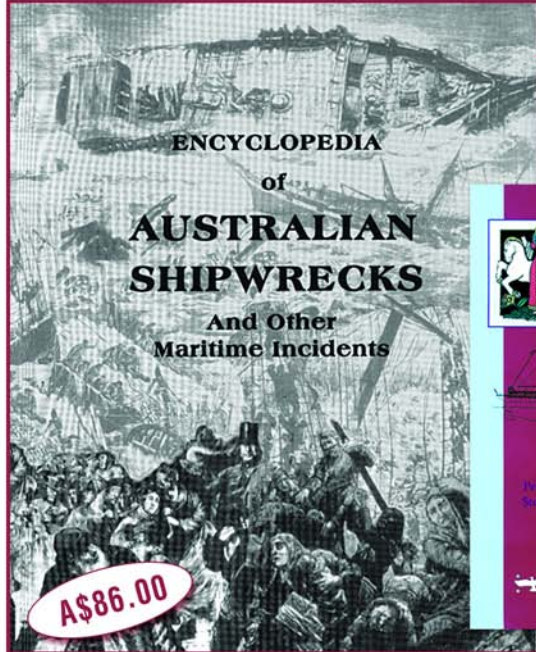
I've traveled extensively in Indonesia for diving and business for the past seven years and I've never had a serious problem. I'm always careful and think ahead but I have no hesitation in visiting.



From top: Banda Naira fort; Banda Naira volcano; *Ondina* under full sail

## THE PETER STONE COLLECTION

AVAILABLE FROM MOUNTAIN OCEAN & TRAVEL PUBLICATIONS  
Tel 03 5944 3774 Fax 03 5944 4024 Email books@motpub.com.au

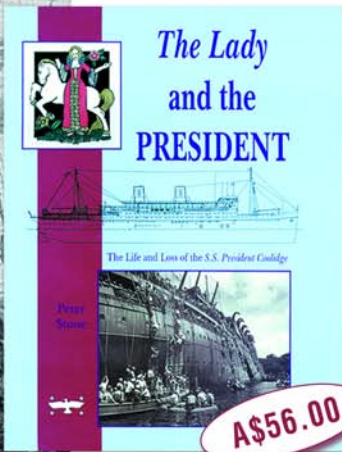


**ENCYCLOPEDIA  
of  
AUSTRALIAN  
SHIPWRECKS  
And Other  
Maritime Incidents**

A\$86.00

The Lady  
and the  
PRESIDENT

The Life and Loss of the S.S. President Coolidge



A\$56.00

\* A\$86.00 incl GST

Encyclopedia of Australian Shipwrecks and other Maritime Incidents, including vessels lost overseas, merchant ships lost at war, and those lost on inland waters, together with a bibliography of vessel entries.

\* A\$56.00 incl GST

The Lady and the President:  
The life and loss of the SS President Coolidge

All prices include 10% GST for Australian residents. Postage & Handling within Australia: \$8.50 for 1 item, \$10.00 for 2 or more (depending on weight). Overseas postage on enquiry. Allow 2-4 weeks for delivery.