



The gentle

> WHEN OUR TOUR OPERATOR MAIK CALLED TO ASK IF I WANTED TO TRAVEL TO THE CENDERAWASIH BAY WITH HIM, MY FIRST THOUGHT WAS: WHERE ON EARTH IS CENDERAWASHI BAY? THE SIMPLE AND SHORT ANSWER IS IN NORTHERN WEST PAPUA. MY SECOND QUESTION WAS: WHAT CAN BE SEEN IN A BAY WITHOUT STRONG TIDES?



Maik's response: "I have absolutely no idea what to expect because we will with the first 20 divers ever to visit this area. But I've heard of whale sharks being at the same place every day!" was Maik's answer. The first part of his answer wasn't very convincing but did awaken my thirst for adventure. The second part of his answer came as a bombshell. Stationary whale sharks - incredible!

The decision was made and flight reservations booked. The journey seemed endless – easily 36 hours from Germany to get there. But the amazing nature and hospitality of the people let all stress and strain disappear as soon as you leave the airport in Nabire. The Ahe Dive Resort is run by former local fishermen, supported by the Scubasigns Foundation.

The approach of the Scubasigns Foundation is simple and effective; in the long term, a successful dive tourism operation is more profitable and far more sustainable than killing

: MARKUS ROTH



bay



1 One second later this huge whale shark bumped my dome port. **2** A whale shark under a bagan surrounded by a school of sardines. **3** Three whale sharks fighting for the best place. **4** Three whale sharks cruising by.



your environment. A good dive operation can easily be the generator behind a turnover for a region of over \$1 million, year after year after year. They don't tell people what they can or cannot do, they let them work out the maths themselves and support them with knowledge and the tools to get things done.

The Foundation works closely with the regional government, local community, private investors, NGOs and excited and knowledgeable individuals that, like themselves, believe marine life is a treasure to safeguard for future generations. Scubasigns is a fully non-profit organisation, whose funds come from supporters, donators and other organisations that are keen to protect marine life.

We spent the first three days doing exploration dives around the Ahe Dive Resort. Even these first dives were surprisingly good. There are beautiful reefs, enormous gorgonian corals with pygmy seahorses and countless crabs and shrimps. Gigantic perforate and imperforate corals resemble the forest in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. We found a fairytale-like underwater world already at the Ahe Dive Resort.

One particular dive in stayed in our mind; we were able to share some of our experience with the local guides. As they're all former fishermen they're not very aware of the minute living creatures found here. With the help of an underwater magnifying glass, we showed them tiny pygmy seahorses – our guides were absolutely stunned. During the following dives we gave the magnifying glasses to them and they explored every single gorgonian. It was a real pleasure to see their excitement.

Despite these wonderful dives, our main reason for being here were the whale sharks. But according to local information the whale sharks usually do not appear



when the moon is full. So on the fourth day of our visit we started a three hour trip at 4:00am. Shortly after sunrise we saw the first *bagan* of fishermen on the horizon. A *bagan* is a 20 metre square large wooden boat construction on which five to eight fishermen, mostly from Sulawesi, live for about a year. At night the fishermen turn on all lights and lower their net into the depths. After a while they turn off one light after the other while slowly pulling the net back up. When it's close to the surface they turn off the last light. With this technique they catch sardines which are used in turn to catch tuna and mackerel during the day.

On route to the dive spot the guides explained that the whale sharks are attracted by the sardines. They start sucking the fishing nets while they hang underneath the *bagan*. The guides also claimed the sharks are almost like pets to the fishermen and would even eat out of their hands. We thought this was just an anecdote because we believed whale sharks only ate plankton. The closer we got to the diving spot the more nervous we became, combined with skepticism.

Arriving at the first *bagan* we couldn't believe our eyes. Four whale sharks, about 3.5–6 metres long, were circling our boat and sucking in enormous amounts of water. This was the first encounter with these gentle giants for Maik and me so we were cautious when we first entered the water. I left my camera on board and we snorkeled for a while to see how the whale sharks would react. They seemed fearless, and came close to us out of sheer curiosity. It was breath-taking – they weren't disturbed by us at all. We went back on board for our dive gear and cameras.

When we re-entered the water there were seven whale sharks around us. Unbelievable, simply unbelievable – I

started pushing the release button of my camera. Even the flash didn't seem to bother them, quite the opposite. They seemed attracted by it, came closer, even rammed my camera to see who the intruders were. It was a magic feeling.

Suddenly things became hectic. The fishermen started throwing sardines into the water and the big whale sharks rushed to the surface to catch as many as possible. We slowly ascended for a closer look – what a spectacle! The sharks were near upright in the water, almost like dogs, trying to catch the sardines in their gigantic mouths. Three eight-metre sharks were close together, competing for the best spot. The fishermen obviously enjoyed their show and laughed loudly at our disbelief.

After the feeding was over we slowly descended again to see if the sharks would swim off. But their hunger, or craving, for sardines was so intense that they began sucking at the fishing nets for more sardines. It was an incredible four hour spectacle, worth every single minute of our long journey to Cenderawashi Bay.



1 A huge whale shark sucking the fishermen's net.
2 This whale shark is sucking in a huge amount of water.
3 The beautiful beach of Pulau Ahe.
4 Pulau Ahe in full beauty!
5 & 6 Fishermen feeding the whalesharks.





- 1 This huge whale shark loves to play with our bubbles.
- 2 Longnose hawfish sitting in a gorgonia.
- 3 A soft coral cowrie.



The best thing was, that the whale sharks are there every day – except the days when the moon is full. I think this place is a real whale shark hotspot!

Another impressive aspect is the learning process the guides have been going through thanks to the Scubasigns Foundation. After our dive with the whale sharks the guides told us excitedly that they had just freed two hammerhead sharks after buying them from fishermen who had caught them earlier. This is a really wonderful example of the Scubasigns Foundation's work after only a short period of time. Hopefully this trend will continue.

For more info on whale sharks visit www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whale_shark & check out the links at the bottom for conservation efforts in your area.

TRAVEL FACTS

Ahe Dive Resort is the only dive resort close to this whale shark spot. Run by locals, it has a very simple standard of living and everything appears a bit unorganized as the resort is still new.

Travelling to Nabire Fly to Jakarta (several airlines offer flights), from Jakarta it is best to fly with Garuda Indonesia, via Makassar, to Biak. From Biak only Susie Air flies to Nabire.

Entry/Exit Requirements All foreign travelers must have a valid passport for at least six months following the date of arrival. Tourist passport holders may apply for a visitor visa on arrival. These Visas-on-Arrival are only for private business or pleasure visits, are valid for 30 days and cost US\$25. They may be extended one time only. All airline passengers are subject to departure tax which must be paid in Rupiah, cash only. When booking your trip confirm the costs of all departure taxes as prices may vary. When travelling to West Papua a *Surat Jalan* (entry permission) is required. A *Surat Jalan* is usually easily and quickly obtained from the police in regency.

Language Bahasa Indonesia is the national language. Although English is understood and commonly spoken in tourist areas, the local people as a whole are often not fluent as it is not essential to daily life. On Pulau Ahe the guides rarely speak or understand English. Only the base leaders speak English.

Currency Rupiah is the official currency of

Indonesia. On Pulau Ahe payment in cash is only accepted in Euro and Rupiah.

Health Sunburn, seasickness, fatigue, coral cuts, fire coral burns, cuts and bruises are health hazards to be anticipated and can be avoided with common sense and care. Malaria protection is strongly recommended and there are a number of drugs on the market which reduce the risk of infection. Still, there is no known way to exclude this risk 100%. Malaria is transmitted by a certain type of mosquito. Some Indonesian islands, like Bali, are considered malaria-free, and some coastal regions and many island resorts, particularly in North Sulawesi, pose a comparatively low risk of infection. However, avoid low lying tropical rainforest areas and places with swampy grounds, as they are more prone to harbour the disease than dry urban areas. Check with your physician on what you should use, compatibility with diving, and possible side effects. With all travels into tropical climates you should have an active immunisation against tetanus and a current polio protection.

Electricity 220 volt. A generator provides electricity only in the evening hours.

Catering Simple regional dishes are offered. Due to the isolation a shortage of supply can occur.

Scubasigns Foundation: www.scubasigns.org