

> THE PLAN WAS TO CRUISE BACK INTO HISTORY TO THE MOLLUCAS REGION AND TO ISLANDS THAT HAD MADE THEIR MARK ON WORLD HISTORY AND THEN QUIETLY SLIPPED OUT OF THE LIMELIGHT. ALONG THE WAY WE'D STOP AT AN ISLAND WHOSE WATERS CHURNED WITH SEA SNAKES, TAKE A LOOK AT THE LAST SPERM WHALING VILLAGE ON EARTH AND LOOK FOR SOME OF THE MOST REMOTE OUTPOSTS IN THE BANDA SEA.

: TEXT & IMAGES
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spice island journey

The trip was through central Indonesia and the region known around the world as the Spice Islands. The emphasis was heavily on scuba diving but there would be occasions to go ashore and explore the land and visit the unique people who lived in this part of the world. The platform for the adventure was a custom-built Indonesian cargo phinisi masted sailing ship. Made entirely of Indonesian woods, this motor-sailer is run by Bali's Damai company. The ship itself is focused on personally guided dives with great personal attention, huge staterooms with all the creature comforts and excellent meals. The owners are Indonesia pioneers. They know these waters well and specialize in doing exploratory trips every year where some of the dive sites are known but others are brand new. This can be a hit or miss proposition, but the anticipation on such dives is always exciting.

Last of the Whalers

We headed out from the island of Flores and after a few dives, wound up at one of the world's last active whaling villages located in the Alor region. This was a real step back into history. We were at La Malera. This is the last community on Earth where men still

regularly hunt sperm whales. Not only that, they still do it as they have done for centuries. By hand. One on one. Man versus mighty marine beast. From crude sailing craft they wield a hand-hewn harpoon. Leaping from the bamboo bowsprit, a single hunter plants this barb in the largest of the toothed whales. Crashing to the sea beside a huge whale, he swims for his outrigger, climbs back on board and the battle has begun.

We went ashore here and marveled at the small vessels used to pursue sperm whales, manta rays and whale sharks off the current-fed coast. These hand-hewn ships with woven sails hold crews of just five or six. They sit at the ready in case a spout is seen in the distance. Some of the village men bear the scars of this extreme profession. Walking with crutches, a few have no legs, crushed by the bite of the angered whale. Others have lost an arm or a hand, perhaps from getting caught in the lines as a whale flees in panic.

One would never suspect this isolated and tiny village, nestled in a rocky bay in eastern Indonesia's Malay Peninsula, is the home of such daring. Children play on the shores. Tranquil and green, its homes sit on the hillsides overlooking the sea. But then one notices the beach is littered with

Above: A white squat lobster moves among the tunicataes under the historic Banda Neira pier.
Left from the top: Cardinalfish peek out from the protection of crimson seawhips;
An anthias stares into the lens; Batu Kapal's sponge covered wall just outside Banda Neira.
The Damai 1 with sails up.
Right: Male mandarinfish engage in combative displays.



Left from the top: A moray eel opens wide for a scarlet lady cleaner shrimp; ; Stunning table coral growth in the Banda Neira Guning Api lava flow; A Dutch fort from the spice trading days.

Above right: A clownfish tends her eggs, laid on the shard of an ancient Dutch bottle on the Banda Neira town slopes
Centre: A skull of a large marine mammal sits by an elder in the sands of the Lamalera whaling village; A baitball in the outer atoll of Nus leur. Right: Huge elephant ear and barrel sponges adorn the Nus leur reef walls at 30 metres; Sandy outflows at Koon are home to decorated dartfish; A juvenile pinnate batfish hides in the shelter of the Banda Neira harbour wall.



huge vertebrate. Rib bones and massive skulls sit in front of colourful sailing ships that are protected in their own thatched houses. The ships are special and so is this place.

We talked with these throwback whalers from the time of Moby Dick, bought a few souvenirs including the amazing ikat hand made weavings depicting whales and rays. Then it was off for more dives as we were nearing the Banda Sea.

Since our main targets were the outposts in the Banda Sea, we looked at the remote volcanic cones and submerged atolls in this rarely dived open expanse of ocean. We pulled up anchor and headed for this region, salt spray crashing across the bow and the moon lighting the endless sea.

Isle of Sea Snakes

One of the more unusual sites we wanted to see was really nothing more than the top of a volcano jutting out of the sea. Manuk is far away from any major inhabited islands. Now silent, this tip of land is a major seabird colony which includes boobies, tropic birds and cormorants.

But as these avians soar overhead, below is something highly unusual. Sea snakes have taken to this outpost in big numbers. When divers hit the water, the flutter of the fins attracts the curious snakes and a diver may find him or herself in the company of one, two or 20 sea snakes. Though docile by nature with deeply recessed fangs, sea snakes are among the most poisonous snakes in the world and, some divers revel in the danger of cavorting with them. Others shy away. The seafans in the depths, the occasional fish school and the constant company of snakes made each of the four dives we

did here unique. And surfacing to the calls of thousands of birds made this a special and unusual place to explore Nature.

Remote Atolls

We headed next to the Island of Nils Desperandum at the mouth of the Salebabu Passage. The Latin translation of this is basically 'never despair' and one had to wonder if a shipwrecked but hopeful sailor may have given this remote atoll its moniker. A lone sandy isle sits on this large submerged atoll. Ships from the spice days like the The Nutmeg of Consolation have traveled here, but that was decades ago. So we felt fairly sure this was probably one of the first times anyone had bothered to use scuba here. Sitting atop a mountain range in the Banda Sea, we entered the water one morning to be greeted by big dropoffs and sandy chutes. Napoleon wrasse and huge dogtooth tuna patrolled the blue. Clouds of silvery baitfish hung in sheets of silver all along the walls, sometimes balling up into tight formations.

We also tried some amazing walls at Nus Leur. This atoll had amazing sponge formations, overhangs and a sheer wall full of color. The varieties of huge barrel sponges, vase sponges, immense drooping ear sponges and colorful rope sponges made us explore in awe the entire dive. The upper reef was a garden of flowing leather corals and scattered coral heads that were home to sea turtles, puffers and lots of anthias. The dive ended with a drift ride over these gardens thanks to a pleasant current flowing up and over the wall.

Spice Islands

The hotbed of history in this region is Banda Neira. This is one of the most picturesque ports in Indonesia, steeped in

world trading history and lined with mountains and a recently quieted volcano also known as Gunung Api (there are many with this name).

Four hundred years ago spices were worth as much or more than gold. They were used as preservatives more so than flavouring and Banda Neira produced the prized nutmeg that all Europe sought. Just one shipload of nutmeg would produce so much income that a family, meaning the entire lineage, would be set financially for life and even generations. The Dutch erected a fort to protect their trade that still sits in the town. Restoration efforts have made this thick walled fortress a fascinating place to visit. And perhaps, just like in the old days, burgundy nutmeg sits drying in the sun along the fort's steps. Families here sell old Dutch bottles and divers can try to find them discarded under the main pier. The families hold on to other heirlooms. Brass cannons and Dutch style street lamps can be seen along the parkways. The people are friendly and strikingly attractive. The houses are still built in the Dutch style and the post harkens back to days of old.



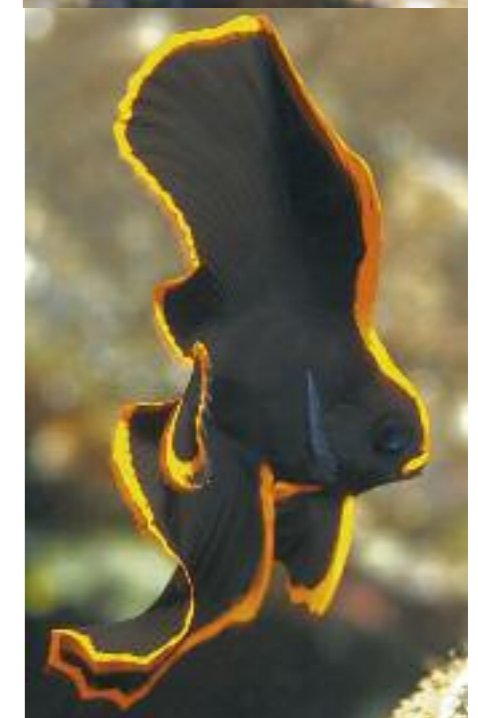
The port is also home to the colourful mandarin fish, which underwater photographers and videographers love to photograph. Normally small and reclusive, emerging only at dusk to mate and establish territory, their orange and brilliant green markings make striking images. Here, for some reason, they seem to grow larger and stay out in the open more than any of their worldwide cousins. This place in shallow water around the piers and along the rocky coast was a photographer's dream. Other creatures included giant frogfish, brilliant fire purple and red urchins and schools of catfish. Bottle collectors were also lucky in that they found a couple of bottles dating back to the 16th Century in the muck beneath this same pier that had hosted the wooden spice ships of the past.

The lava flow that runs into the sea at Gunung Api is a natural wonder. It erupted just a few decades ago. The reef was virtually covered 20 years ago. But it created a perfect soup on a current-fed point. Table corals have grown by leaps and bounds, stunning marine biologists. Natural chandeliers and castles of table coral are now home to huge bumphead parrotfish and mating cuttlefish.

Not that many tourists come to visit this tiny outpost. Those who are, are welcomed. As we left this special town, we were also thrilled to see that a team of rowers in a traditional *kurakura* canoe was sending us off to an ancient drumbeat that no doubt had its deep Malay roots.

We explored islands near this area as well. Walls with huge swimthroughs highlighted one dive. Another was at a giant arch. And one was a pinnacle with a tornado of bigeye jacks. At the same area we also encountered thousands of pyramid butterflyfish in the water column. Other dives in the region were great for shooting gobies of all sorts, from deep dwellers to a nice selection of signal gobies and their various shrimps. At Run, the reefs were healthy and active. Dolphin schools followed the ship. In one isolated bay we found unusual seapens and a seabed covered in tiny anemones. We ventured up another bay into a river reported to be inhabited by saltwater crocodiles. We found only grazing water buffalo but no crocs. But it was a good adventure anyway.

Evenings on Damai are open for those wanting to night dive. But the free spirits





*Left: Beautiful red gorgonian coral whips adorn the wall along Nils Desparandum.
Centre: The staterooms of the Damai liveaboards are spacious and created with beautiful local woods.
Right: Tenders hold only 3-4 divers maximum, guaranteeing personalized guide service on every dive.*

and Bintang beer sometimes led to watching the sun go down and the stars appear from the spacious top deck. Also, the draw of a spa massage or just being eager to eat another gourmet meal were other pleasant deterrents. Life on Damai is relaxed and always comfortable, a wonderful commune with nature in the most refined way. **More to This Sea** From the Banda area, it was a quick trip through Raja Ampat and our Damai ship docked in Sorong. It was here the journey through the lesser-known isles of Indonesia ended. While we got a glimpse of

some incredible marine life and some special cultures, we know there is more to see in the Banda Sea. In the future, we hope to explore this place further and revel in the treasures found here above and below the sea.

PRACTICALITIES:

Visa: Most western passport holders will benefit from the visa-on-arrival system, which is valid for 30 days and costs US\$25 at international entry points on arrival, or it can be pre-purchased from the Indonesian embassy or consulate in your country for a slightly higher fee.

VIP Airport Services: Dive Damai offers a fast-track VIP service to beat Bali's airport queues for \$30 per person and can save hours waiting in the immigration lines. If you'd like to use this service please contact Damai's concierge service.

Currency: The best cash currency to bring is US Dollars. However, all foreign currency is accepted at money changers and most banks. Try and bring new notes and the largest denominations with you if you wish to bring cash. There are many ATM's and banks in Indonesia.

Baggage allowances for domestic flights: These vary enormously between destinations and airlines. Play safe with 20 kg (44 lbs) and one bag. Dive Damai has free dive equipment on the vessels to reduce your baggage weight.

Minimum certification: All diving passengers must provide a current dive certification card of a minimum open water level. **DIVE INSURANCE IS COMPULSORY.**

Visibility water temperatures and currents: Visibility can vary from 5 to 40 metres. This is never a concern due to the huge diversity of life. Dive guides always check currents (they vary), temperature and vis prior to a dive. If a dive is called for in a current, it's because there's something extraordinary to see.

Power: The vessels have both 110v and 220v power. There are many adaptors on board to utilise for battery charging and also laptop computers. Standard Indonesian power sockets take a European two-prong plug.

