

: PIERRE CONSTANT

# INDONESIA EPICENTRIC

✦ THE ENGINE OF THE *CHENG HO* IS PURRING SOFTLY WHEN I WAKE AT 2:15AM. MY CABIN ON THE LOWER DECK IS HOT, SO I HEAD FOR THE UPPER DECK AND INTO THE THICK STILL AIR OF THE SERAM SEA. THE WATER IS FLAT LIKE A LAKE. I RECALL A SIMILAR SITUATION FOUR YEARS EARLIER ON MY FIRST CRUISE TO THE RAJA AMPAT ISLANDS WITH A STAR-STREWN SKY AND A PERFECTLY CLEAR MILKY WAY. IN THE NEXT 15 MINUTES I COUNT 10 SHOOTING STARS, ALL HEADING SOUTH. THE SIGNS ARE AUSPICIOUS, A GOOD OMEN FOR THE CRUISE.

At dawn, after an 80 nautical mile crossing south of Sorong, the island of Misool appears on the horizon. A chain of small mushroom-like islands form an elliptical lagoon on the east of Misool is actually a fossil coral reef created rather recently geologically. Later, due to a tectonic uplift, the reef was exposed above sea level and broken into a number of tiny islands. The northern and southern island arcs are extensions of the karst formations of Misool, with impressive limestone cliffs, deep caves and underground rivers.

*Cheng Ho* anchors on the southern side of Gamfi Island and we dive on a coral slope surrounding an underwater pinnacle separated from the island by a narrow strait. The current from the south triggers a fountain of life: gorgonians, soft corals and sponges, red whip corals, little trees of dark green cup coral *Tubastrea macrantha*. A cloud of glassfish is being repeatedly attacked by tuna and golden jacks. Like drifting kites, a group of mobula rays hover above near the surface. Suddenly a school of Batavia batfish *Platax batavianus* materializes from the deep. These multiple encounters are a real bonus!

The dive at Farondi's Arch begins under a natural limestone arch. It plunges into a wide hole, leading to a balcony 30 metres down. Dive master Gusti points to a microscopic creature inside a red and white gorgonian – a pygmy seahorse I've never seen before, white with red lumps. "I discovered it five years ago...", he recalls, "since it has not been described by science, I gave it my name... et voila, it is *Hippocampus gusti*!" He laughs mischievously. Another site, Pygmy Rock is also full of pygmies; many distinct species are here, such as *H. bargibanti*, *H. denise* and *H. gusti*.

As the sun goes down, we enjoy a dinghy ride in the interconnected lagoons of Wagmab Island, tall cliffs towering above. A secluded Eden rich with birds: white herons, anhingas, hornbills and white cockatoos. A treasure island.

Day three we anchor at Boo Island in the southern arc of Misool. The sky is overcast, the sea is flat and the visibility is improving. The Fan Club site is good for

large seafans, whip corals, little blue and purple gorgonians and a profusion of *Dendronephthya* sp. A good spot for groupers, I come across a beautiful barramundi, white with black dots. Red bellied fusiliers, drifting Napoleon wrasse, various sweetlips species and midnight snappers put on a live show. In the shallows near coral mushrooms carved at their base by wave action, I'm baffled to find enchanting soft coral gardens. This is not to be missed – occasionally banded sea krait is found here, lurking for prey.

On deck at dawn it's raining hard, the islands are bathed in fog. I can't help thinking: 'Another shitty day in paradise...' But the sky clears mid-morning, *Cheng Ho* has moved five miles west in front of Fiabajet Island, near the bigger Kalig Island. Black Rocks is a seamount barely breaking the surface. The black coral limestone has been cooked by eons of equatorial sun. Fish literally swarm here. Of course, I dive with the macro outfit and don't see a single nudibranch! Back to wide angle for the next dive at Two Rocks. Here an underwater pinnacle is next to a narrow strait with the current coming from the north, the perfect recipe for surprises. Clouds of fish in successive waves, swirling around the rocky outcrop, gold spotted jacks, bluefin jacks, longnose emperors, double spotted queenfish, Spanish mackerels... like a kite in the wind, I drift through a water space decorated with gorgonians and little trees of green cup coral. An exhilarating sensation – this is diving as I love it!

Captain Pak Yan sets sail for Seram Island and Raja Ampat slowly vanishes in the wake of the *Cheng Ho*. Overnight we cover 100 nautical miles to Koon Island, a former pirates' refuge on the edge of the Banda Sea. The change of landscape here is absolute. As the sun rises, a line of low lying coral islands appears, crested with coconut trees and fringed by luminous white sands. Underwater, the coral slope is pitted by small caves with overhangs hosting black coral bushes. Huge barrel sponges dot the panorama. Steve finds a marvelous hairy squat lobster, purple pink with red eyes, in the folds of a large sponge. I'd never seen these amazing critters this close before. Fish life here is not very appealing, apart

Main: Commensal crab in fire sea urchin  
Top to bottom: Cuttlefish; Mobula rays  
cruising; Echidna nebulosa moray





from a school of longfin bannerfish. But a Spanish couple, Belen and Martin, meet a turtle and a giant Queensland grouper. The second dive has current which brings schools of red and midnight snappers, ribbon lined sweetlips. I also meet a very serious-looking white stonefish.

The Banda Islands are volcanic and shrouded in history. The imposing and perfect cone of Gunung Api, the fire mountain, rises to 656 metres. It last erupted in 1988, forcing the evacuation of 2000 people. Most of them returned.

The Bandas are also renowned for scuba diving, but I will have only only three dives: Batu Kapal, Gunung Api lava flow and Bandaneira Pier. Looking like a ship stranded on a sandbar, Batu Kapal is a square block of limestone jutting out of the water on the northern end of the Bandas. Helped by the northwest current, crystalline waters flow around the rock. On the menu today: two big Napoleons, a lone great barracuda, a cloud of redtooth triggerfish and a shy school of bigeyed jacks that swirls by an underwater pinnacle west of Batu Kapal. The coral is pretty much scraped by wave action, but huge four-metre wide seafans offer a compromise. Fishing lines and other cables weave spider webs in places.

Diving on the recent lava flow of Gunung Api shows that hard corals rapidly take advantage of new territory and develop fast. Staghorn corals, Acropora table corals, bommies of Montipora coral are all worth a look. Fish life? Only six barracudas came my way.

Yippee! A night dive is scheduled at the Bandaneira pier in front of the old Maulana hotel. An historical place with three small 'lantakas', or bronze cannons, on display. The attraction here is dusk encounters with mandarinfish and seeing their fascinating orgies. Even though you may have seen it already, you always wants to have another look for fun! I head further away on the volcanic sand slope and find a frightening creature, crimson red with white specks and a blunt nose – the reptilian crocodile snake eel *Brachysomophis henshawi*. The monster is a metre long and its bulbous head sticks out of the sand like a slanted periscope.

Crossing the Banda Sea to the northwest isn't easy. Waves at the bow, wind and current. Leaning over the chart table with a compass, the first mate says: "We will

not arrive at 8am as planned, but at 3pm". The news is like a guillotine. It's a good time to visit the library; it also has a 42 inch plasma screen so I watch some good DVDs... We're headed for the Lease Islands, southwest of Seram Island. Nusa Laut is the last island east of Ambon. A few dives at Ameth may bring some large pelagics. A German couple encounters a dugong underwater and even manage a photo! I'm jealous. Night diving is good at Nolana Island south of Saparua; I find a lovely blue ringed octopus near a magnificent coral garden of leaf and cabbage corals *Turbinaria mesenterina*. Giant clams such as *Tridacna squamosa*, the speckled soapfish *Pogonoperca punctata* and the gold rimmed triggerfish, are also seen on site.

The cruise on the *Cheng Ho* ends beautifully in the Bay of Ambon. The volcanic island has two peninsulas, in sandwich on top of one another. Here, the mountainous landscape is wildly tormented due to intense erosion. The jungle is luxurious and omnipresent. South of the Hitu Peninsula, the site Laha II is renowned due to its awesome muck dives. The brown sand slope alternates with volcanic rubble, and a slope covered with green cushion algae. Further away a slope of garbage and other rejections attest to human activities of the harbour.

The whole area is an extremely rich environment for benthic critters of all sorts. Happiness is guaranteed for macro photographers and keen naturalists. My photo harvest includes: a zebra crab in a fire sea urchin, nudibranchs such as *Ceratosoma tenue* or the orange coloured *Ceratosoma gracillimum* (plus a dark green variety), also the beautiful *Nembrotha rutilans* in red, white and purple-brown, a ravishing couple of orange and sooty black Pacific seahorses. I have a surprise encounter with a wunderpus, an imitation of the mimic octopus. Giant slender pipefish, snowflake moray, dwarf cuttlefish and a graceful black frogfish on a bed of pale almond green algae.

Laha I is also called the 'Twilight zone'. The dive site starts under the jetty, where colorful fishing boats are moored side by side. Shoals of fish take refuge in the shadows of the vessels – small silvery jacks, foraging striped catfish in tight packs. It is a haven for soles, goatfish and many species of morays.

I disembark *Cheng Ho* in heavy rain for Latuhalat at the southwestern end of

Ambon. A week here will expand my knowledge. The population of 275000 comprises a Muslim community in the north and a Christian community in the south. The violent confrontations between the two in 1999 and 2002 are forgotten, life on the island has returned to normal. Maluku Divers' new dive centre opened in Latuhalat in 2005. It is run by John Randolph and his Javanese wife Fitri.

The Bandas were the goal of early navigators searching for the fabulous East Indies spices nutmeg and cloves. Well after the Arabs – and following their conquest of Malacca in 1511 – the Portuguese claim to be the first Europeans to locate these fabled islands. Endemic to the Banda Islands, nutmeg and mace were used as flavouring, medicine, and preserving agents. They were like gold on European markets. In southeast Asia, they served as barter money in commerce involving Arabs, Javanese, Indians and the Portuguese. In 1621, the Dutch of the Company of the East Indies (VOC) brutally took over the Bandas to seize the nutmeg plantations. Japanese samurais hired as mercenaries beheaded 44 'Orang kayas' (dignitaries) and impaled their heads on spikes, only to be killed later by the Dutch. At the same time, the British had settled on Ai and Run Islands, with the same interest in spices. Fort Belgica, a grim and sad reminder of Dutch occupation, looms above the village of Bandaneira. Towards the end of the 18th century, French ships took nutmeg saplings for replanting on the Island of France (Mauritius) which broke the Dutch monopoly.

Ten years ago Australian ichthyologist Gerry Allen explored the Raja Ampat with Dutch diver/adventurer Max Hammer. Gerry asked the American organization Conservation International to conduct a survey in the area, despite the geographical isolation and the political situation in Indonesia. His intuition was correct; he recorded 970 species of fish in 2001. Other research by Conservation International and the Nature Conservancy was led by biologist Mark Erdman in 2006 – 56 new species were added, the latter being discovered in the region of Fak Fak (don't laugh!) and Cendarawasih Bay further east on the New Guinea coast. A 'species factory' was how the richness and diversity of the region was described. In 2007 the entire western tip of New Guinea or Birdhead's Peninsula was nominated as the 'Bird's Head Seascape'. The concept is due to the efforts of CI, NC, the World Wide Fund Indonesia, with the support of the Indonesian government. The 'Bird's Head Seascape' covers 70600 square miles containing 2500 islands and reefs, 1300 species of fish, 600 species of corals and 700 molluscs, plus marine turtle nesting sites. In the Raja Ampat region alone, seven marine protected areas were defined, totaling 6500 square kilometres. But all is not yet legally protected by the Indonesian government. Permanent threats include commercial fishing, deforestation and mining (such as nickel). Sharks were eradicated long ago by Indonesian fisheries – especially from southern Sulawesi – but somehow are reappearing in places where projects have support of local fishermen, thanks to economic partnerships.

John used to be a search and rescue helicopter pilot for the United Nations; he worked in East Timor during the 1999-2000 crisis, and later in Ambon where he fell in love with the country. "The situation and the friendliness of the people really touched me, so I wanted to create a community project to help the village..." he explains. Ambon offers varied sites and habitats, plus wrecks. Pintu Kola on the south coast of Ambon is spectacular. The rocky point is etched with several sea caves; underwater a monumental arch opens up into the reef 80 metres from shore 20 to 30 metres down. Decorated with gorgonians, soft corals and giant sponges, it hosts black and midnight snappers, neon fusiliers, yellow-backed fusiliers. I'm thrilled to see two scrawled filefish – usually 'hard to get' photographically. One even allows me a full frame portrait!

Tanjung Mahia is a cape where guide Toby points out a wonderful pink leaf fish; I'm followed through the dive by a school of slender unicorns *Naso lopezi*. The three little islands of Pulau Tiga are hidden on Ambon's northwest, their volcanic ridges plunging straight into the sea. At Pulau Lair, fishers in dugout outriggers hunt with big oblong bamboo baskets lowered onto the coral slope by a long rope. Other interesting dives include Tanjung Sial (southwest Seram Is.), Hukurilla Cave, Lehari, Lehari II, Tanjung Setan, and Maluku Divers' house reef where night dives are conducted by friendly Dutch dive master Jan.

A few months before the International Convention for Climate Change held in



Top to bottom: Filament sponge; *Nembrotha rutilans* mating; Gunung Api volcano

Opposite top to bottom: Pacific seahorse; Imperial shrimp on sea cucumber; Pygmy seahorse

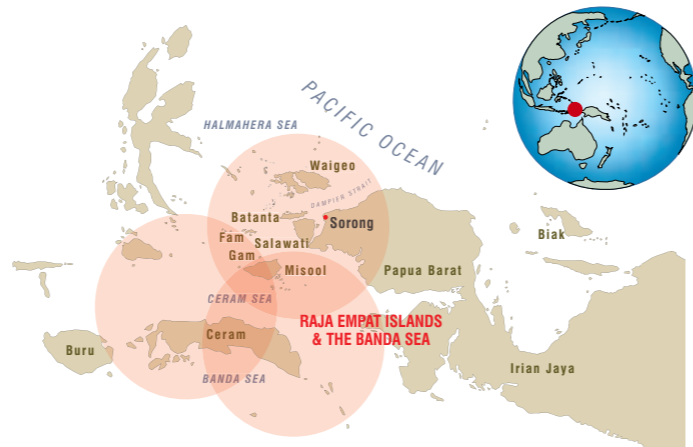


Left: Dive master Nyoman

Opposite clockwise from top left: Fort Belgica 1611 of the Dutch, Bandaneira Banda Island; Dive station at the bow of the Cheng Ho; Cheng Ho at anchor in Wagemab Island

Bali December 2007, the Indonesian president Soesilio Bambang Yudhoyono implemented new measures. Conscious of the disastrous effects of

global warming – due to gas emissions relative to car pollution, industries and deforestation – he decided to slow down the process of forest exploitation by accepting foreign payments to bring a halt to the cutting of the trees in his country. A welcome move for Indonesia, with its poor reputation for protecting the environment. This wind of change will allow the conservation of a number of species fed with extinction (such as orang utans) and threatened by palm oil plantations. Future impacts of climate change on marine resources are also addressed. It became apparent



that the creation of marine reserves were essential to human communities directly dependent on those resources. The proposal made by Yudhoyono to save the marine resources of the Indo Pacific region was welcomed by world leaders during the APEC conference (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation), held in Sydney, September 2007.

The area to be protected was named the Coral triangle; 74748 square kilometres of reefs will serve as refuge for species and help to repopulate damaged reefs of Indonesia and neighbouring countries. This Coral Triangle defines an area that covers central and eastern Indonesia (East of Java), the east of

*Cheng Ho* (formerly the *Sea Safari V*) is a traditional wooden Indonesian Bugis pinisi schooner originally built in southern Sulawesi. Based on the 17th century Dutch sailing boats servicing the spices trade, today they're popular dive boats due to their comfort and unequalled space: 49 metres long, 10.65 metres wide, 3.90 metres draft, for a gross tonnage of 253 tons (76 tons net). Equipped with a 259Kw diesel Yanmar engine, *Cheng Ho* cruises at 8 knots on calm seas. Its crew is 20 Indonesian men, plus two Western cruise directors. The two dive master guides Gusti and Nyoman are expert critter finders. Twenty divers can be accommodated in three upper deck king size cabins, two double and two single sea view cabins on the main deck, plus two doubles/ two twins/ two singles on the lower deck. All cabins have bathroom and shower, aircon, and more depending on the standard. The salon cum dining hall can service 40 people; here also films and DVDs are shown; a convenient screen rolls down from the ceiling. A second dining area is outside in front of the bridge. Another open salon at the stern has a sundeck with long chairs above it. The dive station with compressors is at the bow. Nitrox is available. Photographers have equipment cabinets, plus long tables with shelves for camera and housing maintenance. Cruise director Hergen gives detailed briefings every evening after dinner on the next day's program. Onboard videographer Steve Fish runs his DVD on the first night to give an idea of what's underwater during the cruise, and sells a DVD at the end of the trip. A first 'cold' breakfast is served at 6:30am; a 'hot' one is given after the first dive. Ideally there's two morning dives and two in the afternoon (or one plus a night dive). These may vary between two and four dives depending on ship movements and distances: three to four legs of 80-100 nautical miles. Sea surface and currents are also considered.

>LINKS [www.kararu.com](http://www.kararu.com), [www.divingmaluku.com](http://www.divingmaluku.com)



Borneo, Philippines, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. The epicentre of marine abundance and biodiversity on the planet, this triangle highlights an area that contains 500 to 600 species of corals (>75% of known species), 53% of the coral reefs, 3000 species of fish and the world's greatest extension of mangroves. Some call it the 'Amazon of the Seas'. It supports the livelihood of 126 million people in six countries. "The very heart of biodiversity at the scale of the earth" says Rod Salm. As a matter of fact, the reefs of Raja Ampat are resistant to the threat of coral bleaching and other diseases that affect coral reefs around the globe. Gateway between the Pacific and Indonesia, the Raja Ampat's privileged position of choice, induces larval development - together with the vivifying current that sweeps through the



archipelago - and feeds depopulated reefs with a number of species. The islands are a remarkable breeding ground without doubt. Apart from their natural attraction, the Raja Ampat are unique. The islands must be protected from evil and degradation.

I hope that life will give me another chance to return to this secluded paradise soon – I am bewitched.

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