

Islands of Fire

by PJ Kotzé

I broke the surface in a daze of shock and disbelief and removed a plastic bag that had gotten tangled in my regulator...

The sun was setting as I wove my way through the plastic and trash floating around me in the calm water and as a Muezzin's call to prayer filled the air, a woman knee-deep in the water a few meters away disposed of her vegetable scraps in the sea.

This was me coming to terms with my first muck dive in the bay of Ambon, Indonesia. I was overwhelmed, confused and blown away - maybe it was the four back to back flights and 27 hours of traveling? Perhaps it was the incredible amount of life I had just photographed in the most bizarre spot I had ever visited that got to me. Probably both. The only thing I was certain of at this stage was that I had never seen such diverse macro life in such an odd setting before.

I was in Indonesia with Leon, my sailing, diving and general adventure companion (who also happens to be my father in law) about to embark on 12 days of what would be the best diving we had ever done in some of the most diverse and pristine locations Indonesia has to offer.

Our trip aboard the Mermaid 1 Liveaboard dive boat would embark from Ambon bay, a macro photographer's dream location and renowned muck diving spot. We would head for the remote volcanic Banda islands, offering massive wall dives crowded with prehistoric sea fans, big pelagics, banded sea snakes and generally epic diving.

The trip would then culminate diving in the



A Diver is dwarfed by monstrous fan corals - Raja Ampat

Canon 5D Mark 3, Sigma 15mm F2.8 Fisheye Lens, Ikelite Housing and Port, Ikelite DS 161 Strobes, ISO 320, F8, 1/640

remote sections of Raja Ampat, moving through the Misool area and ending in Sorong in the Northern stretch of the massive marine reserve.

Trying to summarize the experience of diving in Indonesia is a difficult task as every dive could constitute its own article, but I will attempt to share some of the highlights of our Indonesian adventure.

As I briefly explained, Ambon is a weird place to dive, especially if one's trip starts here. Although

the Bay of Ambon is extremely picturesque, the unfortunate reality about most of Indonesia is that many towns and harbours are extremely polluted and floating plastic in the water is quite common.

Being completely new to muck diving, I had no inkling of what to expect as we descended on our first dive. The term, muck diving never really sounded like something I'd like to do - I always saw myself as more of a pristine reef enthusiast but

I'm always open to new things... so I tried to keep an open mind as I descended to the featureless sand beneath me.

Once one sinks below the surface in Ambon, things get really weird really fast. Most dive sites are on sloping black sand walls within about 10 meters of the shore and when you settle on the sand and start looking around... you don't see much. Just patches of reef, some cans, bottles, a few anemones... and at this stage one might be forgiven for questioning your decision to take 4 back to back flights to look at someone's empty Coke can - this was my train of thought at least when I was signalled over by our incredible guide, Adnan to have a look at something. What followed would be repeated on almost every dive the next 12 days: Adnan would point, I would look, see nothing, Adnan would point again, I'd look again and then finally I'd see something amazing. In this case it was a Rhinopias or Scorpionfish native to Indonesia. Ambon is a paradise for different sorts of Scorpionfish and very rare Frogfish species such as the Psychedelic Frogfish and once you get your eye focused, you start seeing them everywhere. Frogfish, the most colourful Nudibranchs, Seahorses and basically everything a macro enthusiast could want, Ambon has it - although we haven't dived Lembeh yet (it's on the list) I could highly recommend Ambon for Macro photographers and it's safe to say that after only two days of Muck diving, I was loving it.

All too soon though, Mermaid 1 lifted her anchor and it was time to make passage to our next destination - the epic Banda islands.

The Bandas are a group of beautiful, small volcanic islands situated about 2000 km east of Java that offer not only pristine diving but also



fascinating history.

During the 1600's and 1700's the small islands were the centre of the world's spice trade and were under Portuguese and Dutch rule for many years, resulting in the familiar terrible consequences of colonialism. Luckily their remoteness has ensured that the islands are in pristine condition above and below water and in stark contrast to the waters of Ambon, the clear waters around the Bandas feel very much untouched.

Our first Bandas dive was incredible and if I had to sum up my impressions in one word it would



*(Left) Giant Frogfish - Raja Ampat
Canon 5D Mark 3, Sigma 15mm F2.8 Fisheye Lens,
Ikelite Housing and Port, Ikelite DS 161 Strobes, ISO
320, F8, 1/320*

*(Top) Chromodoris willani Nudibranch - Ambon
Canon 5D Mark 3, Canon L-Series F 2.8 100mm
Macro Lens, Ikelite Housing and Port, Ikelite DS 51
Strobes, ISO 320, F20, 1/250*

*(Above) Pygmy Seahorse - Banda islands
Canon 5D Mark 3, Canon L-Series F 2.8 100mm
Macro Lens, Ikelite Housing and Port, Ikelite DS 51
Strobes, ISO 320, F20, 1/250*

be, “Prehistoric”, and a wide-angle photographer’s dream. The islands rise from depths of up to 3km and offer wall diving that reminded me of the Brothers islands in the Red Sea. Massive sea fans and barrel sponges line the vertical walls surrounding the islands and when one looks out to the deep blue, Dogtooth Tuna, Giant Trevally and occasionally Scalloped Hammerhead sharks patrol on the edge of visibility which is regularly over 30m.

There were many highlights while diving the untouched walls of the Bandas but undoubtedly I will never forget diving amongst the many Banded Sea Kraits that make the reefs around the smoking volcano, Gunung Api (Fire Mountain) their home.

Diving here is special; Gunung Api is a semi-active volcano with smoke regularly bellowing from it’s gaping mouth and black lava flows running down its sides into the sea where bubbles and jets of heated water can be seen and felt gushing out of the sand patches in the reef. Now, throw into this bizarre mix dozens of meter-long, highly-venomous (they don’t bite) and over inquisitive Banded Sea Kraits, crystal clear water and abundant pelagics and you start getting an idea of the Bandas.

Another unexpected highlight was diving a small, unassuming patch of rocks next to a pier on the main island, Banda Neira, where we got the opportunity to witness and photograph the playful and colourful Mandarin fish at dusk.

Before we knew it, our time in the Bandas had run out and Mermaid 1 made a course to Ceram, Misool and the abundant reefs of Raja Ampat. I couldn’t really imagine how it could get any better but as always, I was open to suggestions.

The last 5 days of our trip were spent diving Ceram, Misool and the Danpier straights in



Vortex of Jacks and Barracudas - Raja Ampat
Canon 5D Mark 3, Sigma 15mm F2.8 Fisheye Lens,
Ikelite Housing and Port, Ikelite DS 161 Strobes, ISO
320, F8, 1/250

the greater Raja Ampat area. Let me put it out there, if you’re looking for pristine reefs with an unimaginable abundance of marine life, I doubt many places could top Raja Ampat.

Although the visibility was sometimes not



Mandarinfish - Banda islands
Canon 5D Mark 3, Canon L-Series F 2.8 100mm
Macro Lens, Ikelite Housing and Port, Ikelite DS 51
Strobes, ISO 320, F20, 1/250

as crystal clear as that in the Bandas, the extreme amount of marine life made up for it. My only problem was that I never knew whether to throw on the wide angle or macro lens as every dive would offer up practically anything a photographer could



Orangutan Crab - Raja Ampat
Canon 5D Mark 3, Canon L-Series F 2.8 100mm Macro Lens, Ikelite Housing and Port, Ikelite DS 51 Strobes, ISO 320, F20, 1/250

ask for; from incredible wide scenes to macro subjects everywhere.

One particular instance where I was very happy to have the macro lens was when our guide, Adnan, excitedly gestured me towards a Gorgonian fan. I honestly couldn't see what he was pointing at and took a photo just to make him stop waving around! Only upon looking at my camera's LCD screen did I notice the tiny Pygmy Seahorse he had been pointing out to me. On the same dive we also had the opportunity to photograph one of my favourite macro

subjects, the Orangutan Crab.

There was just so much to see and photograph that it was difficult to get out of the water everyday, despite the fact that we were regularly doing four 90 minute dives daily. Diving on Nitrox combined with the warm to mild sea temperatures makes the diving here comfortable and mostly easy. Long, slow dives are the norm and one can easily just dive with a rash vest and board shorts - just watch out for the fire coral!

As the end of our adventure loomed on the horizon like an



Oceanic Manta - Raja Ampat
Canon 5D Mark 3, Sigma 15mm F2.8 Fisheye Lens, Ikelite Housing and Port, Ikelite DS 161 Strobes, ISO 320, F8, 1/250

Indonesian rain storm, the coral triangle had two more surprises in store. The first being the opportunity to dive the picturesque mangrove reefs where corals seemed to be stacked like flower arrangements in gin clear water with mangrove trees forming the backdrop for amazing photos and scenes.

The second surprise happened as the final day of diving in the Danpier straits dawned on Mermaid 1. The mood onboard was somber but Raja Ampat had one last surprise for us... I had an idea that it might be something

big when Adnan convinced me to use the wide lens for the last dive and as we dropped to the reef below, the show started. Oceanic Mantas swooping in formation into a feeding station provided the most amazing end to an incredible trip and I have to admit I was so entranced by the flying giants that I managed to surface with my air gauge hopping on zero...

All too soon we were awaiting our return flight in the busy port of Sorong and already the experiences of the preceding two weeks seemed like fantasy in the smog and city traffic.



Coral Arrangement in the Mangroves - Raja Ampat

Canon 5D Mark 3, Sigma 15mm F2.8 Fisheye Lens, Ikelite Housing and Port, Ikelite DS 161 Strobes, ISO 320, F8, 1/250

Reliving the experience of diving the waters of Indonesia through our images, I almost can't believe that we were there. Words fail to describe the intensity of experience when diving in the coral triangle, but I can wholeheartedly recommend it to anyone who is looking for a bucket list diving destination.

There are various budget options and I can honestly say that after diving over the world, it was the best diving and underwater



Adnan, our Guide - Raja Ampat
Canon 5D Mark 3, Sigma 15mm F2.8 Fisheye Lens, Ikelite Housing and Port, Ikelite DS 161 Strobes, ISO 320, F8, 1/250

photography either myself or Leon had experienced. I'm unsure where we should go next as I'm afraid most places will be a disappointment after what we experienced in Indonesia, but as I said, I'm always open to suggestions. On to the next one!

PJ Kotzé

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<https://vimeo.com/262829331>



Mermaid Liveaboard - Raja Ampat

Canon 5D Mark 3, Canon L-Series F4 24-105mm, ISO 125, F5, 1/250



"Ussie" (The Author, PJ on the right and Leon on the Left) - Raja Ampat
Canon 5D Mark 3, Sigma 15mm F2.8 Fisheye Lens, Ikelite Housing and Port, Ikelite DS 161 Strobes, ISO 320, F8, 1/250