

Sailing Across The Banda Sea

by Nigel Marsh

The islands of the Banda Sea were once the most famous group of islands in the world. Known as the Spice Islands, this area was once the only known source of nutmeg, mace and cloves, and attracted traders and raiders from across Asia and Europe. Today these remote islands of Indonesia are better known among divers for their rich coral reefs that are overloaded with fishes and invertebrates, and at times, schools of hammerhead sharks.

The Banda Sea is a wide body of water in the east of Indonesia, located between Raja Ampat and Sulawesi. There are a few shore-based dive operators in this area, mostly around Ambon with its great muck diving, but with the best dive sites well beyond Ambon the only way to explore this area is on a liveaboard vessel. Dozens of liveaboards ply this area, with most trips departing from Ambon. However, I recently joined a very different liveaboard trip on the Cheng Ho, a sojourn across the Banda Sea from Alor to Ambon.

The Cheng Ho is a 35m long traditional style Phinisi schooner with 14 ensuite cabins that can accommodate 26 guests. The vessel is

one of four owned by Sea Safari Cruises that offer liveaboard trips across Indonesia.

Flying to Alor, we were picked up at the airport and transferred to the Cheng Ho. My wife, Helen, and I quickly settled into our spacious cabin, then setup our camera gear for a special treat, an encounter with Mawar.

The itinerary didn't allow us to dive in Alor, as we had to travel over 600 nautical miles over the next nine days, which meant travelling every night and often between dives. However, before we departed Alor we headed out in two small boats to meet the local celebrity, the dugong Mawar.

This over-friendly sea cow swam straight up to the boat and proceeded to hump it. For safety reasons you are not allowed in the water with this frisky male. Instead, we took photos from the boat. This was quite an interesting photography challenge, as leaning over the side I was shooting blind, just snapping away as the dugong swam by.

Mawar the dugong - 1/400, f8, ISO 200, Nikon D500 with Tokina 10-17mm lens, Isotta Housing, natural light



The Cheng Ho liveaboard - 1/800, f14, ISO 400, Nikon D500 with 18-300mm lens





Tender boat taking divers out - 1/640, f13, ISO 400, Nikon D500 with Nikkor 18-300mm lens

He constantly swam around both boats, swimming back and forth. I snapped images as he swam by, and several times had to pull the camera housing out of the water as he stuck his face right up against it. I was a very unusual encounter, but after twenty minutes he got bored and swam off, so we got underway.

Over the next seven days we did some amazing diving off remote islands, atolls and pinnacles. For the first three days we dived sites in the southern Banda Sea. These sites were typically sloping

reefs, with pretty hard coral gardens in the shallows and barrel sponges, gorgonians and soft corals decorating the walls. Each of these reefs was home to a great variety of reef fish and a good supply of pelagic visitors. We enjoyed dives at Reong Island, Tanjung Tutan, Nyata Slope, Palau Limtutu and Terbang, typically seeing mackerel, tuna, morays, sea snakes, barracuda and garden eels.

On these dives I was swapping constantly between the wide-angle lens and the macro lens, as these sites had a great combination



Typical Banda Sea coral scene - 1/100, f8, ISO 200, Nikon D500 with Tokina 10-17mm lens, Isotta Housing and single Inon Z330 Strobe

of subjects. The corals and sponges were great for the wide-angle lens, but I found the pelagic fishes were a little harder to get close too for good photographs.

With the 60mm macro lens I found a few invertebrate subjects, however, the abundant reef fishes were the best for this lens. I shot a variety of angelfish, basslets and butterflyfish, with the best subjects being the numerous anemonefish. I was lucky enough to find two western clown anemonefish guarding their eggs. Another feature were all the dartfish. I found

and photographed arrow dartfish and elegant dartfish, and was very happy to finally get a photo of an elusive spot-tail dartfish.

A highlight in this southern area was Palau Laut. The reef at this site was washed by a current, and had lovely corals and fishes everywhere. There were dense schools of trevally, snapper, fusiliers and rainbow runners. I had my macro lens on the camera, and while I found plenty of subjects, this was one dive that I should have gone with the wide-angle lens, as we encountered a large

tawny nurse shark and a very fat porcupine ray.

Halfway through the trip we arrived at Nildesperandum, an isolated coral atoll at the very heart of the Banda Sea. This site marked the start of reefs where schooling hammerheads are found. Hammerheads are seen in the Banda Sea over two seasons - March to May and September to November. I put the macro lens away and hoped the wide-angle lens would be put to good use.

The anticipation levels were high as we jumped in for the first dive. Unfortunately, the visibility was a little poor, only 10m and not the 20m plus we'd enjoyed so far, and the water temperature was lower at 26°C. It was a little chilly, but this cooler water was perfect for hammerheads. We patrolled the coral wall for over 40 minutes peering into the gloom, yet no hammerheads. Instead, we saw schools of barracuda, trevally, rainbow runners, mackerel, fusiliers and several massive dogtooth tuna.

We were not the only boat looking for



Brown gannet visitor - 1/500, f13, ISO 400, Nikon D500 with Nikkor 18-300mm lens



Broadclub cuttlefish - 1/125, f9, ISO 200, Nikon D500 with Nikkor 60mm lens, Isotta Housing and single Inon Z330 Strobe



Chinese sea krait at Manuk - 1/100, f11, ISO 200, Nikon D500 with Tokina 10-17mm lens, Isotta Housing and single Inon Z330 Strobe

hammerheads, as there were two other liveaboards at this site. We did two more dives at Nildesperandum, and unfortunately no hammerheads. However, there was still plenty to see and photograph including groper, pelagic fish, a hawksbill turtle and a good variety of morays, including several rare spotted morays.

The following day, we arrived at the site I most wanted to visit in the Banda Sea – Manuk. This volcanic island is named after the thousands

of sea birds that nest on it, and we had hundreds of gannets and frigates circling above us. However, the island is also famous for its large population of sea snakes.

Our first dive at Coconut Corner was sensational - 30m visibility, a wall covered in the most beautiful soft corals and sponges, fish everywhere and black volcanic sand between the corals. There were schools of barracuda, triggerfish, basslets, snappers and fusiliers. And we finally

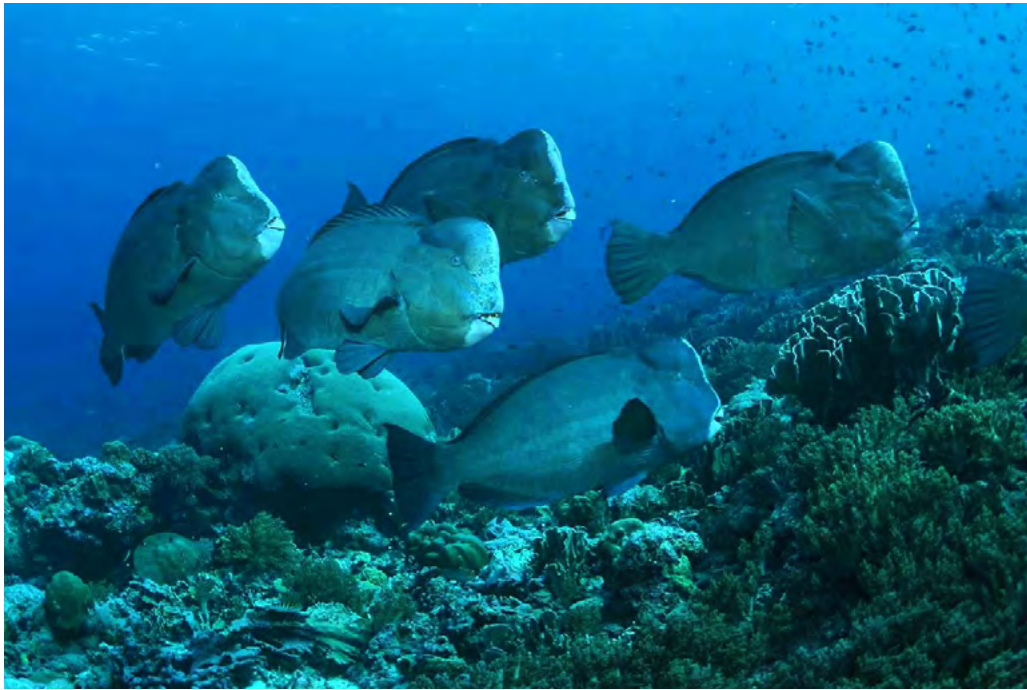
saw the first hammerhead, with a scalloped hammerhead out in the blue, well beyond camera range. I was surprised to only see ten sea snakes on this first dive, mostly Chinese sea kraits, but that quickly changed.

Our second dive at Bubble Ridge was just as good, with more pretty corals, more fishes and many more sea snakes. The sea snakes at Manuk are famous for hunting in packs, often with an escort of trevally, and this is something I dearly wanted to see and hopefully photograph. I saw dozens of sea snakes on this dive, and right at

the end we spotted a hunting pack of six moving over the reef with a group of trevally. Unfortunately, the group only stayed together for a minute and by the time we got over to them they had disbursed.

Our final dive at Manuk at Babylon Ridge was also epic, with more snakes and fish. We also spotted two more hammerheads, unfortunately very briefly.

By now we were deep into the northern Banda Sea, however, sadly this was also our last day diving recognised hammerhead sites. We



School of humphead parrotfish - 1/250, f8, ISO 200, Nikon D500 with Tokina 10-17mm lens, Isotta Housing and single Inon Z330 Strobe



Soft coral garden at Manuk - 1/125, f8, ISO 200, Nikon D500 with Tokina 10-17mm lens, Isotta Housing and single Inon Z330 Strobe

started the day with a bang, with a great dive at Kerang Hatta. This was another gorgeous reef wall covered in beautiful corals. However, we were lucky we could see the corals as swarming over the reef were millions, or possibly billions, of baby red-tooth triggerfish. We have seen schools of these fish before, but nothing like this.

Unfortunately, no hammerheads, instead we saw a school of humphead parrotfish, barracuda, mackerel, tuna, morays, groppers, a hawksbill turtle and a blacktip reef shark. We also had a brief encounter with a group of six mobula rays.

Our next stop was back in civilization at Banda Neira, the most famous of the Spice Islands. We had to stop at the port here to register, with guests given the choice of a visit to the historic town or a dive. We choose the dive at nearby Lava Flow. This site is at the base of a recent lava flow and it was a little average after the dives we had experienced. There was still pretty corals and some nice fish life, but also rubbish in the water from the nearby town.

Late in the afternoon we arrived at Suanggi, the last recognised hammerhead site. We were a bit

surprised to see a dozen local fishing boats in action around the island, and even spotted one that had landed a black marlin. There were also six other dive boats here.

It was almost sunset by the time we got into the greenish water, descending on a pinnacle off the island. The top of this pinnacle rises to 16m then drops to over 50m. The visibility was only 10m and the water was quite dark being so close to sunset. We didn't like our chances of seeing a hammerhead, but followed our guide to the reef edge and looked out into the gloom. There was a

good variety of pelagic fish on show – mackerel, giant trevally, barracuda and snappers. Unfortunately, with the limited visibility the sharks could have been 20m off the wall and we wouldn't have seen them. After 30 minutes of patrolling the wall we were the last group left, so reluctantly headed back into the shallows.

That was when the magic finally happened, when we least expected it a group of nine large scalloped hammerheads suddenly appeared cruising over the reef. They were an impressive sight, swimming around us three times, each time keeping



At last a school of scalloped hammerheads - 1/50, f8, ISO 200, Nikon D500 with Tokina 10-17mm lens, Isotta Housing and single Inon Z330 Strobe

a safe distance away. With our dive computers about to go into deco we finally ascended, happy to have finally seen the Banda Sea hammerheads. I managed a few photos that were not great, simply a record of an amazing encounter.

Our last day at Nusa Laut could have been a let-down, but the pretty coral gardens and coral bommies at this site were overflowing with life. Over three dives we saw cuttlefish, octopus, humphead parrotfish, turtles, morays, boxfish, tobies, leaf scorpionfish, garden eels and a solar-powered nudibranch, with the macro

lens getting a great workout.

Our sojourn across the Banda Sea was an epic dive adventure. We may have only done three dives a day, but sailing the historic Spice Islands and seeing hammerheads, sea snakes and a host of other great species made for an unforgettable dive trip.

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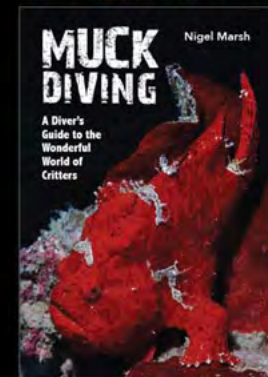
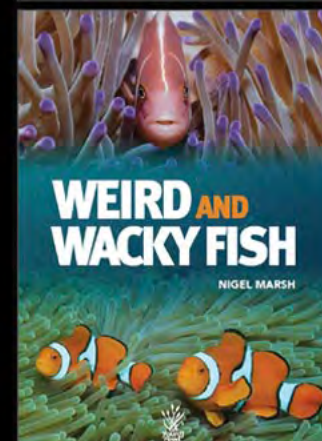
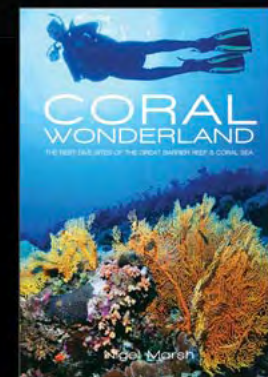
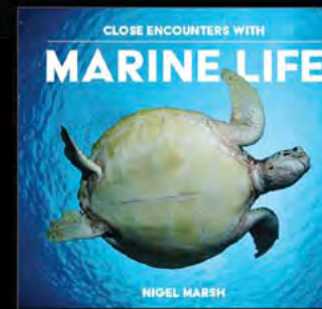
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Nigel Marsh is an Australian photojournalist, underwater photographer and author. Working with New Holland publishers, Nigel has produced a number of guide books for divers and snorkelers, and also a series of children's books with marine related themes.



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