

Sunny Skies and Strange Life in the Maluku Sea

By Michael Emerson

My teenage son, Jonathan, and I left Minneapolis on Thursday evening and finally touched down in the Ambon, Indonesia airport at lunch time on Sunday. We were surprised by an airport that was modern and looked more like one that you might find in Hawaii rather than on a remote island in Indonesia. While we were tired and jetlagged, we were also ready to put our gear together and get ready to hit the water.

Our equipment for the week would be a Nikon D700 with a brand new Subal ND 700 housing that arrived just a week before we boarded the plane for Indonesia. I have been using a Nikon D200 for three years before it met a watery death in the waters of Komodo last August. I share ownership of the equipment with a doctor, Bill Harb, whom I met three years ago on the Spirit of the Solomons liveaboard. Our sharing arrangement allows both of us access to great equipment for our once or twice a year trips to the best dive locations. I shoot all of my photos using raw mode on the N700 which

allows me to take about 105 photos on a 4Gb card. In addition to my camera and housing, I utilize an Inon Z220 and an Inon Z240 for lighting.

Up until two years ago, the island of Ambon was perhaps best known as a location of civil war between Muslims and Christians. The conflict was artificially manufactured by Indonesian military who were looking to regain power by having something to fix. Fortunately, that chapter has been closed and today a visitor is hard pressed to even imagine this recent violent past. The residents of Ambon are warm and friendly. We were even invited into the home of a local family when we had to be 'rescued' when our bus back to the resort did not show up. All of this is a great benefit to

Although Ambon is largely known for muck diving, the nearby islands of Palau Tiga had spectacular visibility and healthy corals. Taken with Nikon D700, Subal ND700, Nikkor 14mm lens, Inon Z240 and Inon Z220 strobes. ISO 200, Aperture priority 8.0 with 1/60 shutter speed.





Sea horses of many colors and size were in abundance at Laha, more than anywhere else I have been. Taken with Nikon D700, Subal ND700, Nikkor 60mm lens, Inon Z240 and Inon Z220 strobes. ISO 200, Aperture priority f25 with 1/60 shutter speed.

divers who have begun to understand the riches under the waters of Ambon Bay.

Maluku Divers has reopened after closing during the civil war and was the home and dive center for our eight day experience in the Maluku Sea. They have a resort with easy access to the ocean and six lovely bungalows that are spacious and air conditioned.

Sea urchins are a great source of material for the macro dive

photographer and those in Ambon Bay are full of little subjects. I used a 105mm Nikon lens with a Macromate wet diopter to get up close and personal with Coleman shrimp and Zebra crabs tucked inside these colorful pin cushions. This was also my first foray into the use of manual focus. This configuration was also ideally suited for shots of pygmy seahorses but we did not find any of these little guys while we were there. All in all the 105 plus Macromate was



Harlequin shrimp had eluded me in my previous 300 plus dives, Here we saw 2 pairs and a singleton on one dive. Taken with Nikon D700, Subal ND700, Nikkor 60mm lens, Inon Z240 and Inon Z220 strobes. ISO 200, Aperture priority f25 with 1/60 shutter speed.

powerful, but very hard work to get perfect. I would get close to a desired focus and then move the camera back and forth to get a perfect focus. Even with the aperture set to a very small F36, the depth of field is practically zero.

The area of diving is relatively small compared to Lembeh. But the density of critters was amazing. On our last dive at the Rhino City dive site we saw 3 rhinopias of different colors, 4 large seahorses

of different colors, a jawfish, a flamboyant cuttlefish, a family of pigmy cuttlefish, 3 snake eels, a warty frogfish and a beautiful shrimp in bubble coral. There were other critters that I had already seen so I didn't have the time to photograph them. On the next to last dive of the trip, I saw five harlequin shrimp, a pegasus sea moth, and an equal number of interesting subjects. Divers in recent weeks had seen a wonderpus and blue ring octopus. The only true



We saw Rhinopias of three different colors in one dive at a site aptly named Rhino City. Taken with Nikon D700, Subal ND700, Nikkor 60mm lens, Inon Z240 and Inon Z220 strobes. ISO 200, Aperture priority f32 with 1/60 shutter speed.

disappointment was the departure of the recently discovered Ambon frog fish which hasn't been seen in the past two months.

Was the muck diving as good as Lembeh? The two areas are similar rather than different. Both areas demonstrate the ability of a strange looking creature to use a tennis shoe as a home. The clarity of water in Ambon was far superior to what we experienced in Lembeh. Clarity comes with some current which was always present on the Ambon sites.

Of course, the one big advantage of Ambon is that you will be the only boat in the water and probably one of a half dozen divers to visit a site on a particular week.

While Ambon is primarily known for its muck diving, its nearby reefs do not disappoint either. The small island grouping of Palau Tiga is reachable with a one hour boat ride on board the fast boat from Maluku Divers. Diving here requires that one of the local dive staff members visit the local chief and ask permission to dive in the island

waters. One day, several of us dove down to try and locate some fishing equipment that had been lost. The mission was unsuccessful but secured a future permission to dive these beautiful reefs.

The most spectacular dive here started with a quick descent to 100 feet with a strong current that carried us along a pretty wall. The most notable feature of the dive was the constant presence of thousands of red-toothed triggerfish along with smaller schools of fusiliers and pyramid butterfly fish. We also saw a good sized black-tipped shark that somehow had eluded the relentless shark finners that have decimated the stock of sharks throughout the world.

Towards the end of the dive, we drifted up to a spectacular reef top at 20 feet and found a healthy and colorful reef that was as pretty as I have seen in Fiji or Komodo. It was here that the new FX format of the Nikon D700 made the biggest difference in my ability to capture the beauty of the reef. With a 14mm lens, I was able to capture the same angle as a fisheye 10.5 on the DX format camera without the distortion that comes with the fisheye format. In my recent dive trips, I have focused primarily on macro photography, but I have a renewed interest in taking in the wider beauty of the reefs with this new lens and sensor format.

All in all, our trip to the Maluku Sea and Ambon Island was a great diving experience and I would recommend it to anyone who wants to photograph a full range of highly unusual fish, shrimp, and crabs. The scars of the civil war were invisible to us while we were there and you could not imagine an island where the people were more friendly and wanting to help you have a great time. The island is lush and beautiful and will help you fill in your time in between dives unless of course you are busy trying to figure out the names of all of the subjects from your last set of photos.

Michael Emerson



Don't settle for 2nd best



Film - No Filter
No White Balance



Digital - No Filter
Manual WB



Magic Filter
Manual WB

Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards.

These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter; using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

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