

The Eel Man of Ambon

by Rod Klein

Arriving in Ambon, I enter the small arrival terminal at the airport and am greeted by the wiry, high energy Ambonese man that is Yongki. He is the driver, “go-fer”, expediter, and overall indispensable guy that an expat-owned dive operation needs to help get things done. He’s also always on time, which is a big deal in this part of the world. Another virtue is that everyone knows Yongki. He’s greeted by almost everyone as we walk outside. I’m thinking, “I’m with the right guy”. He loads my gear into his black, well-worn SUV. I buy him a juice and myself a coke at a sidewalk stand outside the airport and we’re off.

As we take the 90-minute drive to Maluku Divers, I ask Yongki, for the record, to spell his name since I can’t quite understand his pronunciation. He gives it a shot but, although he can speak English, he doesn’t really know the English letters of the alphabet. It takes about 15 minutes for me to figure out how to say and spell his name and I continue to try and pick his brain about the local area and culture. Instead of driving all the way around Ambon

Bay to the resort, he uses the local ferry that cuts some time off the drive and I get a little extra taste of the local culture. Everyone is friendly and the kids are really interested in me...a short, fat, bald, white guy from who-knows-where.

While some liveaboards include diving in Ambon Bay on their itineraries, it is Maluku Divers, located in the village of Latuhalat on the southern tip of Ambon that has taken on the task of bringing diving back to the area. Founded by American John “Buck” Randolph and Brit Andy Shorten, Maluku Divers is the first actual land-based dive operation that has opened since “the conflict”. Currently, it is a fairly basic facility but the advantage of Maluku Divers over the occasional liveaboard operation is the knowledge that they have of the local diving and its critters.

During my stay at Ambon with Maluku Divers, I not only had incredible diving but I experienced the local culture of Latuhalat Village and the adjacent Namalatu Beach. On the weekends families would gather and kids would play in the waves. I



(Left) These eels are said to be sacred and are under the watchful care of the village patriarch, 61 year old Maggnus. He has adopted these eels and feeds them every day with raw eggs. (Right) This is Yongki. He is the driver, go-fer, expediter, and overall indispensable guy that an expat owned dive operation needs.



visited the local fish and fruit markets transported from my room to the dive center in a bechak, visited the local war memorial cemetery in honor of the allied troops kept by the Japanese during World War II, and toured the area with the colorful Yongki. But it was my visit to Waii that provided the crowning jewel in what had turned out to be not only a great diving experience but an enriching cultural experience was well.

The word for water in Indonesian is “air” but in the Ambonese dialect water is “waii”. About an hour north of Maluku Divers is the aptly-named village of Waii. The land where the village is built has a natural fresh water stream that runs through it. Over the years the village has built up the sides of the stream with concrete and it provides fresh water for the village, a place where the local women wash their family’s clothes