

Mucking in Molluca

by Mark Webster

During the first age of global exploration when characters like Columbus, Vasco Da Gama and Magellan were the heroes of the age, one of the major objectives was to find a route to the fabled spice islands in what is now Indonesia. In the 15th century spices were a valuable global commodity which many believed offered protection from the various plagues that prevailed in Europe as well as being used to flavour food and disguise the taste of rotting meat! Prior to this era of maritime exploration these spices had been imported via overland routes in small quantities and so were a rarity which traded at very high prices. One of the best known trading areas established by the Dutch East India company were known as the Molluca islands which were rich in cloves, mace and nutmeg and the island of Ambon became a major export hub in this valuable trade.

Fast forward to the 21st century and Ambon is earning a reputation for a very different commodity which is highly prized by underwater photographers...plenty of muck on the seabed and the treasure trove of exotic critters to be found! Whilst

Ambon has been on the radar as an attractive dive location for quite some time, the development of diving facilities and resorts was arrested by political turmoil around the year 2000. The region is now stable again and the area began to become a start or finish point for several live aboard operations and one local dive centre reopened under the name of Maluku Divers. This resort was initially based close to Ambon city but in 2010 moved to a newly built resort closer to the airport and perhaps more importantly closer to some of the best dive sites in the bay.

Maluku Divers is fast gaining a glowing reputation amongst underwater photographers and divers who are keen to see the weirdest

Rhinopias eschmeyeri, paddle flap Rhinopias – all scorpion fish yawn at some point and the Rhinopias is no exception. I spent long enough with this fish to watch him feed several times on cardinal fish and he would often yawn following the swallowing process which gave me the chance to anticipate the shot. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, 2X teleconverter, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO200 f11 1/125.



The waterfront accommodation at Maluku Divers is bungalow style with very spacious dimensions inside and a covered veranda to watch the sun go down with a cold beer in your hand.



Sea whip shrimp are seen in pairs frequently with one being very much smaller (the male possibly?). You can reduce the shutter speed in a macro shot to capture some natural light but you have to wait for your moment as the sea whip is often vibrating in the current. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon wet lens, Inon Quad flash, ISO200 f16 1/30.



creatures that Indonesian waters offer. So far this is the only resort here offering comfortable accommodation and the facilities that we have come to expect, so coming here is a little like the early days in the Lembeh Strait when there was only one resort and you would rarely see another dive boat. The resort itself is very intimate and will take a maximum of 18 guests in spacious, comfortable bungalow style rooms each with a veranda facing the sea. There is a central complex that comprises the restaurant, a lounge area, well equipped camera room and to the side of the development the dive centre with dedicated camera rinse tanks. The resort is managed by Marcel Hargendijk and LiLi Tey, a delightful couple who ensure efficient and safe operations and are keen to assist with any issues.

There are three dive boats available, so even if the resort is full

of photographers the boats are not crowded and there is plenty of space for cameras. There are 48 named dived sites spread along both sides of the bay and whilst some do merge into their neighbours it does mean that there is plenty of choice and space to separate the small diving groups if all three boats are in action. If you are feeling adventurous and need a fix of coral reef diving then full day excursions can be arranged to the reefs outside the bay and beyond to Seram Island. There is also a wreck close to the main port which is well



Imperial shrimp on sea cucumber – these gorgeous looking shrimps are frequently found on sea cucumbers and also on the larger species of nudibranchs. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100 f18 1/125.

worth diving, but more of that below.

Many of the dive sites have a particular species as the star attraction, so if you have a wants list it is best to declare this as soon as you arrive and the dive guides will plan the dives accordingly to make sure you achieve your goals. There are no guarantees when dealing with nature of course, but I certainly was not disappointed and the only thing we did not see was the famous Ambon psychedelic frogfish (*Histiophryne psychedelica*)

but that is a rare beast indeed and has only been seen a handful of times. I have described a few of my favourite dives below to give you a flavour of what to expect.

Twilight Zone

The resort is located on the edge of the village of Laha and several of the sites are named and numbered after it dependant on the position between the resort and the fuel bunkering jetty to the north. The

Twilight zone is one of the original sites identified by Burt Jones and Maureen Shimlock in the mid 1990's and it has lost none of its appeal since. The dive occurs mostly under moored fishing boats so light levels are low (hence the name) and there is constant noise from generators and vessels coming and going. You should also be prepared for high levels of trash both organic and inorganic as everything from trainers and paint tins to boiled eggs and fish carcasses are simply lobbed into the water by the boats above, but of course this is total nirvana to muck critters!

You will see a huge range of muck critters here and perhaps the greatest concentration of different species of moray eels that I have ever encountered. Every hole seems to have one and in many cases there are three or four all peering out at the same time. In the shallows amongst broken coral rubble you will see Mandarin fish behaving as though it were dusk due to the low light levels, whilst further down the slope the guides will show you the resident Harlequin shrimp and any number of Harlequin, robust and velvet ghost pipefish. There are dozens of scorpion fish of various species and probably as many stone fish of which you may be blissfully unaware, so it is wise to have a long stainless steel much stick which you can use to support yourself



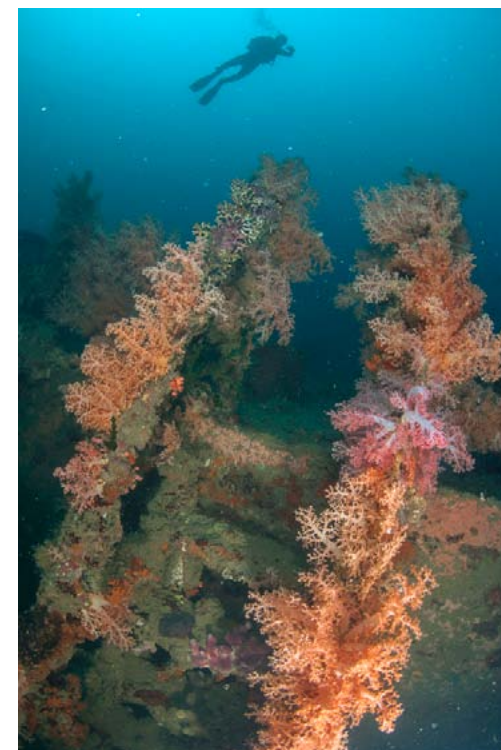
Mandarin fish could be seen throughout the day at the Twilight Zone due to the permanent dusk quality of the light. Fishing boats are moored here most of the day blocking out most of the sunlight which just adds to the atmosphere of the dive! Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100 f11 1/125.

clear of the bottom whilst composing your images.

Under the jetty itself there are large schools of silversides and also some large catfish that seem to like to shoal in mid water. If you can persuade yourself to forsake a macro lens for one dive then there are some appealing wide angle compositions to be had when the shafts of sun light pierce down from the jetty and between the boats.

SS Aquila (originally the SS Duke of Sparta)

This is a large wreck (137m long, 17m beam) which was sunk at anchor close to the main harbour in 1958 by US aircraft during the communist rebellion in Indonesia. It is still very intact and has 50 years of coral growth to decorate it, but it is a relatively deep dive with the main deck an average depth of 30m so is best dived with nitrox. Being close to the harbour the visibility is



Stair way to forecastle deck on the wreck of the SS Aquila. Diving this wreck close to the main harbour in Ambon makes a nice break from the muck and a chance to use your wide angle lens. Sunk in 1958 the wreck is covered with soft corals and invertebrate life. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO350 f11 1/100.

not always spectacular, but if you are used to diving wrecks in the UK you will think it is good! There are masses of soft corals which make great foreground compositions with the wreck as a backdrop, but there are

also heavy silt deposits in places so move carefully and advise your guide to keep off the deck. If you are brave then you can penetrate the wreck easily into the engine room, but only do this when led by the guides. Towards the bow the main mast still stands proud with a horizontal platform at around 12m, so this is an ideal point to start your ascent and then make a final stop above it. Be cautious when surfacing as there is a lot of small boat traffic in this area of the harbour.

Rhino City

This dive site is correctly named for once! The Rhinopias scorpion fish is perhaps the most spectacular variation of this species and Ambon bay has a very healthy population of them. The guides advised me that dependant on the season there maybe a population of more than twenty around the bay, but between this site and the neighbouring Laha3 we were shown four examples, two pinkish paddle flaps (Rhinopias eschmeyerii) and two weedy examples (Rhinopias frondosa) in yellow and purple. Three of these were in surprisingly shallow water, 3m in one case, whilst the purple one was around 27m which is what I expected from previous encounters. They are fantastic looking fish and I could have spent a whole dive with them, but of course you have to share these subjects with other photographers! But there is plenty more to keep you busy whilst you wait your turn or queue for a second stint – giant yellow frog fish, red warty frogfish, octopus, cuttlefish and many true macro subjects like zeno crabs on sea whips, which you will have to ignore if you have set up for the Rhinopias!



A species new to me on this trip were the hairy gobies which are found in pairs within small branch corals. They are very skittish and require a good deal of patience to capture a portrait. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon wet lens, Inon Quad flash, ISO100 f18 1/125.

Pante Nama Wall

On the east side of the bay there is a nice wall dive with plenty of healthy corals which makes a nice change to the diet of muck and small coral outcrops. You can shoot wide angle on the wall or elect to stay with your macro lens and still find more than enough to keep you busy for several dives. There are many anemones and bubble corals here with attendant triple fin gobies, eggshell shrimps, ghost shrimps and hirsute orangutan crabs. Colourful gorgonians are found all along the wall which provide a home for decorator and porcelain crabs and some very attractive cowries, but you will need good buoyancy control and the use of your muck stick to get a steady shot at high



Rhinopias frondosa , weedy Rhinopias – The shape, camouflage and appendages of these fish are immensely complex. This head on shot illustrates that complexity and is strangely appealing as a portrait! Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 10-17mm FE zoom, 2X teleconverter, Inon Z240 flash guns, ISO200 f11 1/100.

magnification. The wall is also an excellent place to spot some exotic and strange looking nudibranchs and flat worms and we were lucky enough to find a pair of Nembrotha chamberlaini mating in a



splendid green hue with marbled yellow markings. Ghost pipe fish, leaf scorpion fish, bearded scorpion fish all make cameo appearances and during our dives we also had a delightful tiny clown frog fish is vivid yellow.

Pante Parigi 1 & 2

The sites on the west side of the bay tend to have a mixture of coral outcrops, broken coral and rubble and grey sandy slopes. So you will find a mixed bag of muck type critters, reef fish and a healthy variety of crustaceans. One of the most spectacular looking shrimps found on this side of the bay is the Saron or

marbled shrimp (Saron marmoratus) which has the most striking mixture of pattern and colour which leaves you wondering what it is for. There is also another odd looking shrimp known locally as the Donald duck shrimp (Leander plumosus), which sounds like an odd name until you see one. The corals here include many sea whips, gorgonians and clusters of soft corals as well as some large barrel sponges all of which provide a home to crustaceans, molluscs and small fish. These are mostly in the 1:1 macro range but you may need a wet lens to increase magnification for the smaller species like the zeno crabs



Diving is from spacious fibre glass boats with twin out boards. Plenty of room for cameras and a good diving ladder.



The camera room is set up with individual work stations with non slip mats, wet trays, power sockets and additional lighting. Nikon D200, 18-200mm zoom, ISO200 programme mode.

found on sea whips.

One species that the guides were keen to show off that was new to me were the hairy gobies (possibly *Gobiodon acicularis*) that are found in small outcrops of branching corals. These tiny fish live in pairs within the branches of the coral together with the small crabs that emerge at night. They are pretty nervous but inquisitive enough to settle for a few seconds to look at the camera. You will need a longer macro lens for these and a great deal of patience but it is worth it as these fish produce very cute portraits complete with their designer stubble.

Kampung Baru

I was hoping to see some Coleman shrimps on this trip and I was not disappointed. My past experience is that the fire urchins with these attractive little monochrome shrimps are generally found between 25-30m. On this particular site we had an army of perhaps two hundred fire urchins marching towards the shallows in only 4-6m depth. Only a few had the elusive Coleman shrimps, whilst a number of others had resident alien looking zebra crabs, but of course you only need one pair to keep an underwater photographer happy. These tiny shrimp may need extra



Striped midas blenny – there are many blennies and gobies to be found living in small holes on the reef or in man made debris, but they often get overlooked as most photographers are concentrating on the exotic species. But whilst you are waiting your turn with a muck star look around for these guys to keep you amused. A species new to me on this trip were the hairy gobies which are found in pairs within small branch corals. They are very skittish and require a good deal of patience to capture a portrait. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100 f18 1/125.



Leaf scorpion fish are very common on most of the dive sites in Ambon bay and are found in various colours. This deep pink one is one of the most striking. Nikon D300, Subal ND20, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, ISO100 f11 1/250.

magnification and often need a little tinkering with lighting angles as the fire urchins literally glow red hot with flash on them.

If the Coleman shrimps were not enough, the same dive produced warty frogfish, snake eels in pairs, cockatoo wasp fish, a very well decorated weedy spider crab and to finish the

dive a mimic octopus.

The above is just a taster of what the area can offer. The hardest decision is of course which lens to put on so that you do not miss the unexpected critter the guides may turn up. But the great thing is that you can always return to a site to repeat the experience with the most suitable lens and lighting. We spent ten days here and when the time came to dry out and pack up I felt I was only just settling in and would have happily spent much longer with individual subjects.

Travelling here is also very easy with a couple route options to consider. We came via Jakarta and

spent a couple of days there to adjust our body clocks before continuing on to Ambon. You can also come via Bali which offers a very pleasant break in the journey. It is possible to make the connections without an overnight stop on the way, but it is preferable to do this so that you arrive relatively fresh for the first day of diving. So if you have a penchant for muck and perhaps a little wide angle with relative solitude then put Maluku Divers on your bucket list.

Mark Webster
www.photec.co.uk

