

## FROM BANDA TO RAJA AMPAT



THIS TRIP BEGINS IN AMBON, CAPITAL OF THE MOLUCCAS. FROM THERE WE WILL VISIT THE BEST DIVE SITES OF THE HISTORICALLY IMPORTANT BANDA ISLANDS, THE “SPICE ISLANDS”, STRATEGIC DUTCH COLONY, THAT EUROPEAN POWERS HARD FOUGHT FOR IN THE 16TH AND 17TH CENTURIES. ALONG THE EAST COAST OF CERAM WE WILL CONTINUE TOWARDS RAJA AMPAT. THE FANTASTIC LABYRINTH OF ISLANDS AROUND MISOOL IS ABSOLUTELY BREATHTAKING AND HAS BEEN SCIENTIFICALLY PROVEN TO BE THE EPICENTER OF GLOBAL MARINE BIODIVERSITY. IN THE RAJA AMPAT MARINE PARK WE WILL SPEND MEMORABLE DAYS AND WE WILL FINALLY END THE TRIP IN SORONG, WEST PAPUA.

### DIVING BANDA SEA

Until recently, the only link with the outside world was through two ships of Pelni, the state-owned maritime transport, which comes every week or two, in the small port of Bandaneira. The inaccessibility of the Banda Islands has kept the dive sites in its original state and enriched the almost desert white sandy beaches of an unusual beauty. In these primordial environments the possibilities for diving and snorkeling are at least extraordinary, as a consequence the Banda Islands are scheduled for almost all liveaboard.

From Ambon we will reach Nusa Laut, for sailing then to Banda and to continue towards Koon, considered one of the top 10 dive sites in the world. Then we cruise to Waigeo and Sorong in the archipelago of Raja Ampat in Papua. Large schools of dolphins are a common sighting in the channels between the islands and can often be followed in the boat as they jump and play.

Fascinating land excursions to the old Dutch Fort give you a special feeling to this place full of colonial influence that, from some years, is becoming a hip destination for international tourism. For those energetic enough, there is the challenge of climbing the still active Gunung Api, volcano that dominates Bandaneira and offering a beautiful view of the Spice Islands.



DIVING INFO 	
Diving season	From March to April and from October to December. The months of March and April, and mid/late-September to early/mid-December are the best times for diving in the Banda Sea, based upon surface conditions.
Rainy season	From January to February and from June to August.
Water temperature	27-32°C
Visibility	10-40m.
Depth	10-45m.
Currents	Usually gently but can be strong.
Surface conditions	Calm.
Experience level	Beginner–intermediate-advanced
Dive sites	>60.
Length of stay	Recommended 10-14 days on liveaboard cruise

TRIP ADVISOR →	
Airport	Arrival Airport Ambon. Departure Airport Sorong. International flights reach Bali, Jakarta or Manado then domestic flight to Ambon (overnight in Makassar from Bali or Manado flight). Return from Sorong to Manado, Bali or Jakarta and then connecting to international flight.
Weather	27-32 degrees. Indonesia has two seasons: wet and dry. In most of Indonesia, dry season runs May-Sept and wet season Oct-April, but in West Papua and Banda Sea it does contrary: dry season runs Oct-April, and wet season May-Sept, in fact the most serious liveaboards advice against this cruise during July to mid-September, cause strong winds and rough seas.

## AMBON

The diving around the island is great, the wreck in the bay is full of life, pilot whales sometimes come close to the pier, but without a doubt Laha offers the best diving and is an unforgettable experience. Laha could be compared with Lembeh, it is pure muck at its best: mimics, flamboyant cuttlefish, rhinopias, ribbon eels, Ambon scorpion fish, frog fish by the dozens, ghost pipe fish... you name it, it is all there. Photographers... get ready!

## NUSA LAUT

Only a few hours away from Ambon, Nusa Laut it is the best example of a village taking care of a reef. The reef is as it was hundreds of years ago. The locals have protected it and now it is an outstanding diving site. A little contribution in Indonesian Rupiah will be asked, for in forcing the "no take" protected area.

The hard corals on the slope are unbeatable, the sandy bottom in the middle offers shelter to sting rays of different sizes, huge bumphead parrotfish and sea turtles. In the depths patrolling reef sharks, white tips and grey ones, and also leopard sharks and hammerheads.

The encounter with the school of bumphead parrotfish fish feeding in this protected habitat will send in bliss uw photographers and videographers, where some resident dugong has been spotted.

## PULAU SOANGI

A few miles sailing from Banda we arrive at Pulau Soangi. This is exceptionally rich spot plentiful of sea life which list includes bump-head, blunt head parrotfish, jacks, Napoleon wrasse, sea turtles and sharks as residents and some hammerheads as visitors, if you are lucky enough for coinciding with their eventual passages.

A nice wall that ends up in a ridge where encounters with pelagics (dog-toothed tunas, rainbow runners, barracudas, trevallies, mackerels), are always a thrill, as is the presence of a number of hammerheads that we spot regularly.

The wall itself is worth the dive, huge barrel sponges, even bigger fans, soft corals on the wall and hard ones in the best conditions.

## BANDA ISLANDS

Banda has an important place in Indonesian and world history. Dominated by a 2.500ft active volcano, for more than three hundred years these tiny islands were the center of wealth for the Dutch colonies. They were the only source of the rare spices of nutmeg and mace for centuries and the Dutch, after capturing them from the Portuguese, guarded them jealously from all comers including the English. For centuries, a kilo of these spices held more value than the same weight in gold. The old fort, the governor's house, the church, nutmeg plantations, are well worth visit and bring us back to colonial era.

Let's not forget the diving, both Pulau Run and Pulau Ai have pristine clear waters, lovely walls and good fish life, we might go a bit deeper in search of more hammerheads, big fish can be seen here as well, napoleons, schools of black snappers, bumpheads, etc. The outer reefs of Bandaneira are full of marine fauna of all colors and shapes. Schooling fish gather and the macro life is rich. A really unique area is the dive under the pier of Bandaneira. The size of the mandarin fish is just out of this world and if you are looking for other critters as cockatoo wasp fish, flying gurnards, frog fish, juvenile barramundis, juvenile emperor angle fish, juvenile sweetlips... this is the place. A bit south is Hatta, consisting of an underwater coral garden with a friendly school of bumpheads and some white tips among its highlights.

Those who are fit and want to get up early, can climb the Volcano Gunung Api to watch the sunrise. Of course diving is our main focus and the dive site Lava Flow is not to be missed. Twenty 20 years ago Gunung Api erupted and the lava poured into the ocean and in the short time since a hard coral garden grew which is unrivaled in the world. Table corals over 5m width, staghorn corals as far as the eye can see and even endemic species found nowhere else is just a sample of what you can see here.



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## KOON

This island is located in the South of Seram Island and is the next stop after our departure from Banda. The bad thing is Koon has only one dive site, the good one is that spot is named "Too Many Fish". What makes Koon so special is the location on a trench that goes down to over 3,000m. All the big sea life that passes from the north to the south ocean has to go through these waters. Big schools of all kinds of fish, trevally, batfish, snapper, grouper, pompano and barracuda are seen here. There's also the chance to see Orcas, whales and sharks. Depending on the moon phase the strong currents can make this dive very challenging.

## MISOOL

The Misool route will show you an abundance of the undersea world. Its beauty will carry you away! Hundreds of isles, which have been pushed up throughout the thousands of years and build a wonderful scene. Everywhere you come across caves or caverns, you will find rocks as big as cathedrals, overhangs that all together improve the dramatic sight of these breathtaking landscapes. Of course these sights will continue in no less impressive views under water. Misool is one of the places on earth where you will find the most various species of fish, hard and soft corals, sponges, worms, nudibranchs, shrimps and crabs and all kind of non-vertebrates, like cuttlefish and octopus. You will as well come across Wobbegong shark and Epauvette sharks, which you will only find in the region of "Raja Ampat". Giant clams as well as fantastic tiny shells. Photographers as well as videographers will have the dives of their lifetime.

## DAMPIER STRAIT

This will be the place of some of the most exhilarating dives of your underwater career. The water looks more like a river than a sea. The currents here are so strong that during the WWII the Kerupiar Island now better known as Mike's Point, was confused with a Japanese destroyer and bombed by the US aircraft. You will be immersed in a swirling profusion of marine life where an impressive amount of fish trying to feed marine nutrients, while huge predators try to feed them. You will witness an exceptional display of the whole food chain in an open display: a fighting for food and survival where we are merely observers. The effect is electrifying, and something so unique as to certainly make the trip worthwhile.

In Arborek a Jetty full of sea life will delight the macro lovers rewarded them with amazing pics of bizarre creatures.

This is also the best place in Raja Ampat for diving or snorkeling with groups of big oceanic mantas *manta birostris*, in the famous manta points known as Manta Sandy, Manta Ridge and Manta Mantra.

## KRI ISLAND

When conditions are right, the nearby dive sites are nothing short of excellent. On dive sites like Sardine Reef, Cape Kri, and the aptly named Koteka, you will enjoy some of the very finest wide-angle photo opportunities you've ever seen. Beautiful hard coral bommies were host to dazzling soft corals and rainbow-colored crinoids with a foreground of oriental sweet lips or coral trout, a swirl of glassfish and anthias, and a background of schooling surgeonfish, jacks, and the occasional tuna.

When the visibility is right, the dive points around Kri Island can be the underwater photographer's heaven.

## Trip Highlights

Bandeneira has maintained its look of old colonial city, the renovation of the old houses is shown with pride by the residents, as well as the small factories of products made from the spices that made famous the islands. An unforgettable journey back in time to observe monuments and curious artifacts of other times.

Misool have a labyrinthine of channels with hundreds of small islets and limestone karsts and there is the opportunity of dinghy boat tours to explore them or kayaking in the shallow bays. There are large cave and tunnel structures very impressive, with huge limestone stalactites, of a very dramatic and stunningly beautiful!

Trekking into the Salawati forest to experience an encounter with bizarre birds like the Bird of Paradise.



Photo Courtesy: JL Honduras

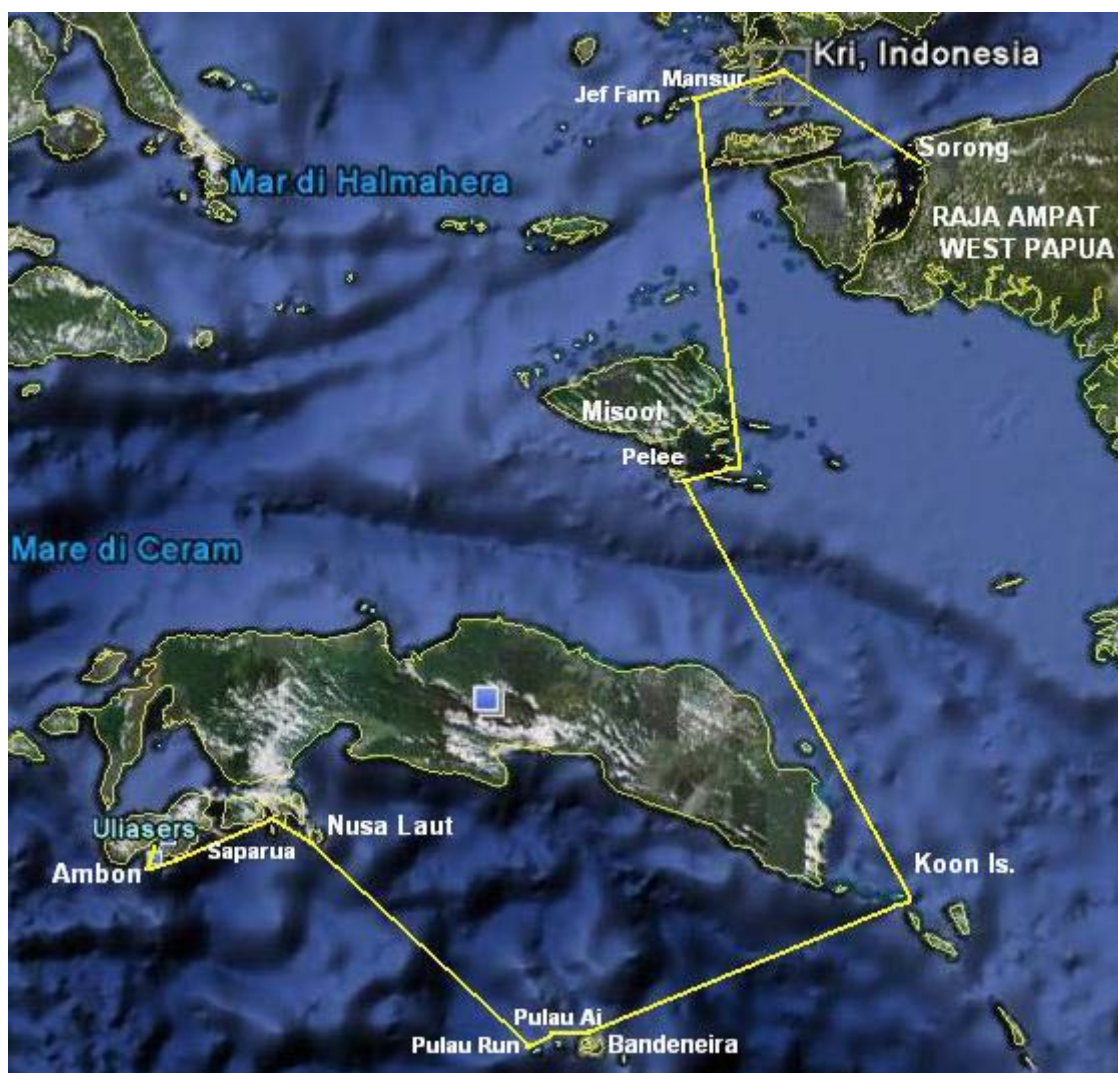
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SIDETRIPS 点	
Whale Sharks Sanctuary:	In Cenderawasih Bay, where is possible find whale sharks at any time of the year.
Climbing:	The Carstenz Pyramid.
Wreck Diving:	WWII Wrecks of Manokwari.
Trekking:	In the Baliem Valley highland of Irian Jaya, inhabited by the Dani Tribes and other sub tribes of Yali and Lani with their complex and primitive cultures, which looks more like "stone age" cultures.
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