



Print version diving in the Moluccas (Kepulauan Maluku) – Ambon, Banda, Halmahera
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The Moluccas (Maluku) are also known as Spice Islands. For a long time spices like nutmeg and mace (also cloves, pepper and cinnamon) were only found here. These spices were very valuable and Chinese and Arab in the 7th century and later the Portuguese, British and Dutch in the 16th century traded with these islands. There was a lot of fighting to corner the lucrative spice market, finally Dutch even gave the island of Manhattan to the British in exchange for, among other things, a small island (Banda island) that gave the Dutch full control over the Banda archipelago.

Around 1858 the islands (Ternate, Halmahera, Makian, Bacan, Buru, Seram, Ambon) were also visited by Alfred Russel Wallace, a British naturalist and collector. Nowadays Wallace is best known for independently proposing a theory of natural selection which prompted Charles Darwin to publish his own theory. Wallace's interest in the Moluccas was mainly in the collection of rare animals and birds. Among other islands he also visited Aru island (South Maluku) where he realized, that the Aru islands and other moluccan islands must have been connected by a land bridge to mainland New Guinea during the ice age. This helped him to formulate his theory of a zoogeographical dividing line running between Bali and Lombok, extending north through the Makassar Strait between Kalimantan (Borneo) and Sulawesi, the so called Wallace line. On the western side of this line the animals are predominately of Asian origin (tigers, rhinoceros etc.). On the eastern side of the Wallace line the animals are of Australian descent with a lot of endemic species.

Indonesia lies on the so called "ring of fire". These volcanoes make for beautiful photos and interesting hikes but are also sometimes dangerous. The Moluccas have also experienced earthquakes and tsunamis.

Diving around Ambon, Haruku, Saparua

Ambon island lies in the central part of the Moluccas (Spice Islands) and consists of two peninsulas (Leitimor and Hitoe) connected by a narrow neck of land. The bay thus formed cuts about 20km into the island with the airport on the northern shore and the city of Ambon on the southern side.

The diving in Ambon is mainly done in the Amboyna Bay and you come here basically for the great muck-diving. Be prepared for some interesting critters and amazing behavior! The most well known dive site, the Twilight Zone lies close to the airport (northern side of Ambon Bay, close to the Maluku Divers) and is an area, where you can find some very special animals like Rhinopias scorpionfishes, frogfishes, seahorses, stonefishes, ghostpipefishes, pegasus sea moths, mandarin fishes, nudibranchs, harlequin and coleman shrimps, kauris, wonderpus, mimic and flamboyant cuttlefish. This is also the area where the famous psychedelic frogfish (*Histiophryne psychedelica*) was found.

For coral diving there are also some really nice places you should visit, for example Pulau Tiga, a group of tiny islands in the western tip of Ambon or Pintu Kota or Hukurila Cave in the south side of Ambon island where you can do wall diving and dive in caves and swimthroughs. Several nice dives sites are found around Saparua, specially to the south, around the cape and Molana island and Nusa Laut. Here you find mostly large schools of fish, pelagics like tunas and jacks and sharks. Specialized muck-diving operators like Maluku Divers seldom dive here, you would have to try some of the other dive operators (Paperu Resort, Blue Rose Divers) or liveboards.

The best months for diving are September to December and March to April but also the months between. The Moluccan islands have the seasons reversed from the rest of Indonesia, when they have the dry season, its rainy season in Indonesia and vice versa. Visibility is usually good (20-30m) except some muck sites close to the harbour or where sand is easily stirred up.

The Muck Diving

Ambon Bay west side (Leitimor)

Airport Jetty (No. 4): This dive site is underneath a long pier which lies just past the end of the airport runway. There are always large schools of small fishes and juvenile batfishes between the columns covered with sponges and on the sand you find small critters like nudibranchs, morey eels, lionfishes and sometimes Rhinopias scorpionfishes.

Kauri Point (No. 5): You dive on a slope covered with sand and rubble. Among the stones there are small sea fans where lots of Kauri snails are living. We found a total of four different species just on this dive site, among them the beautiful tiger Kauri (*Crenavolva tigris*) and some kauris that look like they are part of the coral (*Prosimnia piriei* and *Phenacovolva rosea*) and are usually rather difficult to find. On an other sea fan dozens of small porcelain crabs and several species of spider crabs were crawling about.

Air Manis Jetty (No. 9): You can see this jetty from the dive resort, it is a working jetty, so there were boats overhead. Underwater there is some rubbish around, but also plenty of interesting critters. A special find were the shy yellowhead dwarf gobies (*Trimma stobbsi*) and a Lined Fire Worm (*Pherecardia striata*), about 20cm long.

Maluku Divers House Reef (No. 11): This is a rather nice house reef to dive. On the top there are sandy areas interspaced with soft coral fields and some large coral blocks. On the slope sand we found lots of nudibranchs, several species of ghost pipefishes and pipefishes and lots of hawkfishes all hiding out in the large yellow sponges that abound. This is also a good place for night dives.

Middle Point (No. 12): A rubble slope with a lot of waving soft corals on the top and special sponges that look like grayish leaves. There is a large coral block with leaf fishes and lots of cardinalfishes on about 17m and we got stuck there because there were so many photo opportunities. Some of the cardinalfishes had eggs in their mouth and two pufferfishes were circling and fighting. Further down our guide found a pair of Halimeda Ghost pipefishes (*Solenostomus halimeda*) nearly invisible among the Halimeda plants and another single one the same color as the special sponges. Part of this dive site was covered with the colorful poisonous sea urchins (*Asthenosoma ijimai*), some with Coleman shrimps (*Periclimenes colemani*), some with Zebra crabs (*Zebrida adamsi*) or both.

Kampung Baru (No. 13): This dive site is just outside of the village, at a place where the boats are anchored. You start on sand and then swim to a slope with lots of stones, sponges and some corals. Towards the end you go back to the sand where there are some large coral blocks. We were lucky and saw two Rhinopias in this shallow area, so we could spend a lot of time with them. The pink one actually swallowed a fish while we were watching - but much too fast for any of us photographers!

Rhino City (No. 14): The whole area from Rhino City through the Twilight Zone to Laha 3 is a great place for diving. The dive sites are basically slopes with stones, patches of corals, sponges and soft corals. It seems to be one of the places you regularly find the exquisitely colored Rhinopias scorpionfishes. These beautiful animals come in yellow, blue, red, pink to peach and brown and are actually not very shy. There is a lot of confusion about the three Rhinopias species. In Indonesia you find only the weedy Scorpionfish (*Rhinopias frondosa*) and Eschmeyer's Scorpionfish (*Rhinopias eschmeyeri*). But not the lacy Scorpionfish (*Rhinopias aphanes*) - that species is only found in Papua New Guinea and Australia.

Twilight Zone (No. 15): The area from Laha 1 to Laha 3 is also called the Twilight Zone. This area is also the area, where the psychedelic frogfish (*Histiophryne psychedelica*) was found.

Laha 1 (No. 15a): During my stay in Maluku Divers there were really a lot of Harlequin shrimps around, all living among the stones on the slopes of Laha 1 to 3. They came in all sizes and were living in groups of two to three shrimps. I was privileged to see a tiny harlequin shrimp toting a small starfish around. It climbed over stones, through rubble up the slope, carrying the starfish. The starfish was actually bigger than the shrimp, but it held it firmly with two of his legs, it looked like it was rolling the starfish around! This is also the place for an early evening dive for Mandarin fishes.

Laha 2 (No. 15b): A slope covered with stones and small sponges, corals. Lots of frogfishes, nudibranchs and slugs and sometimes flamboyant cuttlefish, jawfishes, lots of gobies, small crabs and shrimps and ghost pipefishes to be found.

Laha 3 (No. 15c): We dived here several times, because at that moment there were Rhinopias living there. During my visit we saw three different ones, a blue, a yellow and a smaller brownish one. On our first dive there we saw very interesting behavior - two of the Rhinopias were fighting, the blue one was biting the yellow one and jamming it around, shaking it and then following it snapping at it until it left the area. The first dive saw us on 30 meters, but later they moved to shallower water. It seems they move around a bit all the time and are seen on the dive sites between Kampung Baru and Laha 3.

Tower Tawiri (No. 16) and Magic Tawiri (No. 17): These are also a muck sites, but because there are so many great muck sites closer to the Maluku dive resort, so they don't go here that often.

Mimic Point (No. 21): This dive site is a 10 minute boat ride away. A muck site with cuttlefishes, an Ambon scorpionfish (first I saw in Ambon!), some nudibranchs and a small wonderpus, but no mimic octopus!

Batulubang-Wreck (Duke of Sparta / Aquila) (No. 22): The wreck is 137m long and lies from about 15 to 35m deep. From a plaque detailing a serial number of a Water Heater which was discovered in the machinery of this wreck it was possible to find out, that it is the cargo ship SS Duke of Sparta. The ship was launched in 1940 from the William Gray shipyard, West Hartlepool, sold in 1951 to an Italian company from Naples and renamed SS Aquila. She sunk in 1958 in the northern part of the Ambon Bay.

Ambon Bay east side (Hitoe)

Tirta Point (No. 23): This dive sites lies across the bay from the resort close to Amahusa and we did two dives one on the north and one on the south side of the Tirta Hotel. Both sites are sandy slopes with a patchy reef and algae covered stones. The sand is very fine has a lot of glittering stuff (mica flakes?) in it, so be careful with your fins if you want to stay friends with your fellow photographer! We found a lot of nudibranchs among the stones and it is worth to look at all the whipcorals for shrimps and gobies and among the other coral fans for tiny crabs and decorator spidercrabs.

Devion Point (No. 24): We spend most of our time on a large coral block, where there were breeding cardinalfishes, a small clown frogfish and some leaf fishes. Finally when we were low on air we ascended and started observing the jawfish in the sandy area who were excavating their burrows.

Kaca Lengkung (No. 25): A gentle slope covered with stones and algae and some sponges and coral blocks. Out dive guide found one small colorful nudibranch after the other. One coral fan was full of small gobies and lots of transparent shrimps. We ended the dive on a small reef with a stonefish, two leaffishes, a juvenile ribbon eel and several jawfishes.

Hollywood (No. 26): You can't miss this dive site, because on the seaward wall somebody wrote in large letters HOLLYWOOD! No idea what famous fishes or shrimps live there, perhaps a *Brattus pittii* or *Angelinamus joliae* with paparazzi-divers gathering around?!

Dark Blue Jetty (No. 27): The blue roofs of the fish factory close to this jetty can even be seen on Google Earth. The area is covered with sand with some sponges, corals and some garbage. We found a brick red Clown frogfish, a very unusual color, two different species of stonefishes and under the jetty on the pillars lots of sponges, hydroids and small soft corals several Black-saddled Toby (*Canthigaster valentini*) and the rare Honeycomb Pufferfish (*Canthigaster janthinoptera*). Our dive guide found a minute boxercrab (*Lybia caestifera* which is different from the more common *Lybia tessellata*) waving minute anemones. On the pillars you also often find frogfishes perching there and batfishes or schools of small fishes gather underneath.

The Coral Diving

Ambon island

Pantai Parigi 1 and 2 (No. 28 and 29): This dive starts about 100m south of the jetty. It is a steep slope covered with nice corals and large sponges and with some sand coming down in channels. After a while the slope turns in a wall with nice small crevices and large coral outcroppings. There are a lot of bryozoans and small hydroids growing on the wall and everywhere are blue and yellow tunicates. Between we found nudibranchs, a harlequin shrimp and a juvenile frogfish. At the end of our dive everything was covered with Black Triggerfishes (*Melichthys niger*) and mackerels darting among them.

Pantai Nama Wall (No. 30): A very nice wall, lots of corals and large sponges. Its worth to look closely to the reef but also look out in the blue. At one point there is an area completely covered with black coral bushes with small damselfishes, longnose hawkfishes and butterflyfishes fluttering among them at another point there is a large outcropping with a bit of current and lots of butterflyfishes. On the start of our dive a small group of juvenile batfishes accompanied us, later a group of mackerels were hunting around us and at the end everything was covered for a short time with fusiliers, so this dive sites also offers good opportunities for wide angle shots. There were also a sea snake and several large groupers around. Between we saw lots of nudibranchs, orang utang crabs in the bubble corals and shrimps.

Pantai Nama Slope (No. 31): In this area the wall becomes a slope, less coral and more rubble. Good place for frogfishes, ornate ghostpipefishes, sea cucumbers with emperor shrimps riding them and other critters.

Nusaniwe Point (No. 33): Seems this is also a nice place for a walk on the beach and up to Nusaniwe point, where you have a nice view over the Banda Sea and where you can see "Batu Konde" which means Coil stone, a rock resembles a woman's hair coil.

Namalatu (No. 35): The name of this beach was taken from the words Nama which means Name and Latu which means King. Wall dive on a nice coral reef with lots of sea fans and gorgonians.

Pintu Kota (No. 36): This is a well known dive spot in the south, the name can be translated as Gate of the City. On land a giant rock juts out to the sea with a large hole so it forms an arch. Underwater there is also a archway lying at about 15 to 17m and covered with sea fans and gorgonians. On the other side the slope goes down steeply, so you do most of the diving on the arch and finish at its highest point on 7meters. Good wide angle opportunities but also look out for small critters.

Mahia Cave (No. 38): Sandy slope with several reefs and a small cave at 30 meters.

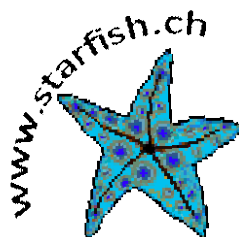
Hukurila Cave (No. 40): An example of some amazing underwater architecture - you enter from the top through a hole or chimney in the reef and then have a choice of several swimthroughs. The place is covered in sponges, soft corals and sea fans. Normally good visibility and lots of fish life.

Pulau Tiga (Pulau Ela, Pulau Hatala, Pulau Lain) No. 47-49: A good place for a day trip with some nice reef diving and lunch at one of the beaches.

Haruku, Saparua island

Cape Paperu Dive Resort House Reef (No. 54): Lots of coral blocks and table corals with nice fish life, night dives possible.

Amet (No. 57): A reef slope close to the village, wall to 45m near the jetty.



Banda islands

The Banda Islands (Indonesian: Kepulauan Banda) are a group of ten small volcanic islands in the Banda Sea, the capital is Bandanaira, a seaport. The islands lie quite remote, about 140km south of Seram island (Ceram) and are known for healthy reefs and pelagics.

Dive sites around Banda island

A well known dive sites is Batu Kapal (shiprock) which has a series of pinnacles, Pulau Ai which is a island to the west of Banda Neira and which has several dive sites mostly to see sharks, mobulas and beautiful coral reefs. Or you might want to check out the lava flows around Gunung Api (Fire mountain) a small volcano island lying just across a small strait, to the west of Banda Neira and while diving here you can see a lot of sea snakes. But there is also some great muckdiving at the Banda Neira Pier.

Halmahera islands, Weda

Halmahera island is the largest island of the Moluccas with a chain of volcanoes in the wet and limestone formed by pushed up seabottom in the east. Halmahera has been separated from the other land masses (Sahul) so there are lots of endemic species.

Rob Sinke from Divers Lodge Lembeh has built an Eco-resort on the east side of Halmahera on the shore of the Weda bay. Weda Dive Resort is open around the year, diving is offered from the middle of September to the middle of June. To reach Weda Resort you fly to Ternate, take a ferry over to the mainland and then drive for about 3 hours on a scenic route to the resort.

The diving is spectacular with coral gardens, walls with cavern, caves and overhangs, gentle slopes and underwater mountains. Easy diving with no current, where you find everything you want in the shallow water. Fish life is abundant with mackerels, sharks (look out for the endemic Epaulette Shark discovered here) and lots of reef fishes. There are also some dive sites with black sand where you can do some serious muckdiving and some mangroves. Here you find the mimic octopus, nudibranchs, Bobbit worm, Lembeh seadragon and ghostpipefishes. You can dive right in front of the resort in their house reef, other dives sites are from 5 to 60 minutes away. There are two fast boats to bring you to the dive sites.

Apart from diving you can also do bird watching and hiking and trekking in the jungle. The area is limestone karsts with lots of caves, rivers and dense jungle. The resort organizes birding trips, trips to the bat caves and the waterfalls. There are over 20 endemic bird species living on Halmahera and nowhere else. Already the famous naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace visited these islands to collect birds. Parrots, cockatoo, hornbills can be seen around the resort, to see the birds of paradise you walk into the forest accompanied by a guide. The 400 hectares of privately owned forest around the resort have several walking paths with small bridges and stairs to cross the river and with places to sit and watch the birds and other jungle animals. More paths are found in a different area some 15min by car.

Animals to see include the Wallace Standardwing Bird of Paradise (*Semioptera wallacei*) a beautiful bird which can be seen in groups of up to twenty bird with the male birds proudly displaying their beautiful plumage and the Paradise crow (*Lycocorax pyrrhopterus*), the Moluccan Scops Owl (*Otus magicus*) and many more. Reptiles such are Weber's Sailfin Lizard (*Hydrosaurus weberi*), pythons, and endemic lizards and gekos and mammals like the Sulawesi bear cuscus (*Ailurops ursinus*), several endemic species of bats, Asian palm civet (*Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*), imported deers and pigs are found in the forest and butterflies, for example the Wallace's Golden Birdwing (*Ornithoptera croesus*) and the Wallace's Giant Bee (*Megachile pluto*) are common here. I also heard, that there are interesting plants found here, for example pitcher plants (*Nepenthes* spp) which catch and digest insects.

The Eco resort is built by local builders with Sago palm wood and leaves for the roofs with all the wood grown locally and the trees felled replaced with new plantings. Solar and wind power is used throughout the resort. Robs and his wife Linda are very much involved with the local community, they have helped to build public toilets and are currently working on bettering the water supply for the village. Their Sawai Ecotourism Foundation is supporting education for the kids and adults in the villages around their resort and they will be glad to show you some of the projects they do. Pencils, books or toys for the village kids are always welcome.

Some diving around Halmahera is also done from liveboards which pass the island on their way from or to Manado or Lembeh North Sulawesi. You can dive around Maitara island, Pilonnga island, Tagalaya, Mare Island, Terumbu Gora (sea mount) and the Goraichi island group and in the Patinti straits, Tolimago, Toputopu, Pawole Island. Since I haven't dived there I have no idea how good the area

