

Ambon

Maluku's Magical Isle

Text and photos by Don Slocck





Blenny on a sea-whip



Pair of Coleman shrimps on a fire urchin. PREVIOUS PAGE: Octopus in mid-water at the Twilight Zone

Indonesia is a country that can constantly surprise and delight—usually when you are least expecting it! So it was, with my first experience of Ambon back in 2006, when I and a very sad and seasick party of Banda Island-bound divers found our way into the safety of its magnificent natural harbor. We had departed from Maumere in the south some five days earlier, and after two days diving around Alor and other sites along the Lesser Sunda Islands, we headed northeast for the mystical Bandas.

September is a time of changeable weather on the Banda Sea. We encountered heavy seas that made our Pinisi-style live aboard take on all the characteristics of a cork, as we pounded our way forward into the wind.

Pinisi boats are designed and built for the monsoonal trade winds to carry them along with the wind, not head-on into it. After two days and nights of constant pitching and rolling, we were offered a choice—at least two more days of the same punishment or 18 hours of easier seas by heading due north to Ambon.

The instinct to survive is a powerful one. The decision to abandon the trip to Banda Naira was unanimous, and the next day, we reached the safety of Ambon's harbor.



Puff up: the fish watches warily



The Moluccas

Back in 2006, Ambon had just about returned to normal after the “troubles” of 2000 when heavy rioting broke out between the Christian and Muslim populations of the island.

Indonesia has the largest population of Muslims in the world, with some 86 percent of its total population of almost 250 million following Islam. It also hosts the largest Hindu population outside of India, resident on the island of Bali, and a significant number of Christians on Ambon and in the surrounding Maluku province.

The Christians are a legacy from the 16th century when the Dutch made Ambon their center of operations in the Moluccas, as the area was called then, while they dominated and ran the incredibly lucrative spice trade.

Prior to independence, the Dutch colonial rulers introduced a policy called Transmigration, whereby workers from the densely populated main island of

Java were “encouraged” to work on plantations in Sumatra and other locations. Post-independence, the Suharto regime revived the policy as “transmigrasi” whereby whole families were given financial inducements to relocate from Java to areas such as Ambon and West Papua.

In Ambon, the transmigrasi migrants grew into a significant block of Muslims, who established their own village kampongs alongside Christian ones. The two religions coexisted reasonably peacefully until Christmas 1999, which coincided with the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, when a combination of circumstances came together and were ignited by, of all things, a traffic accident between a Christian bus driver and a Muslim youth.

The subsequent riots and civil unrest escalated into what became known as “the troubles”, and resulted in the area being effectively closed to all foreigners,

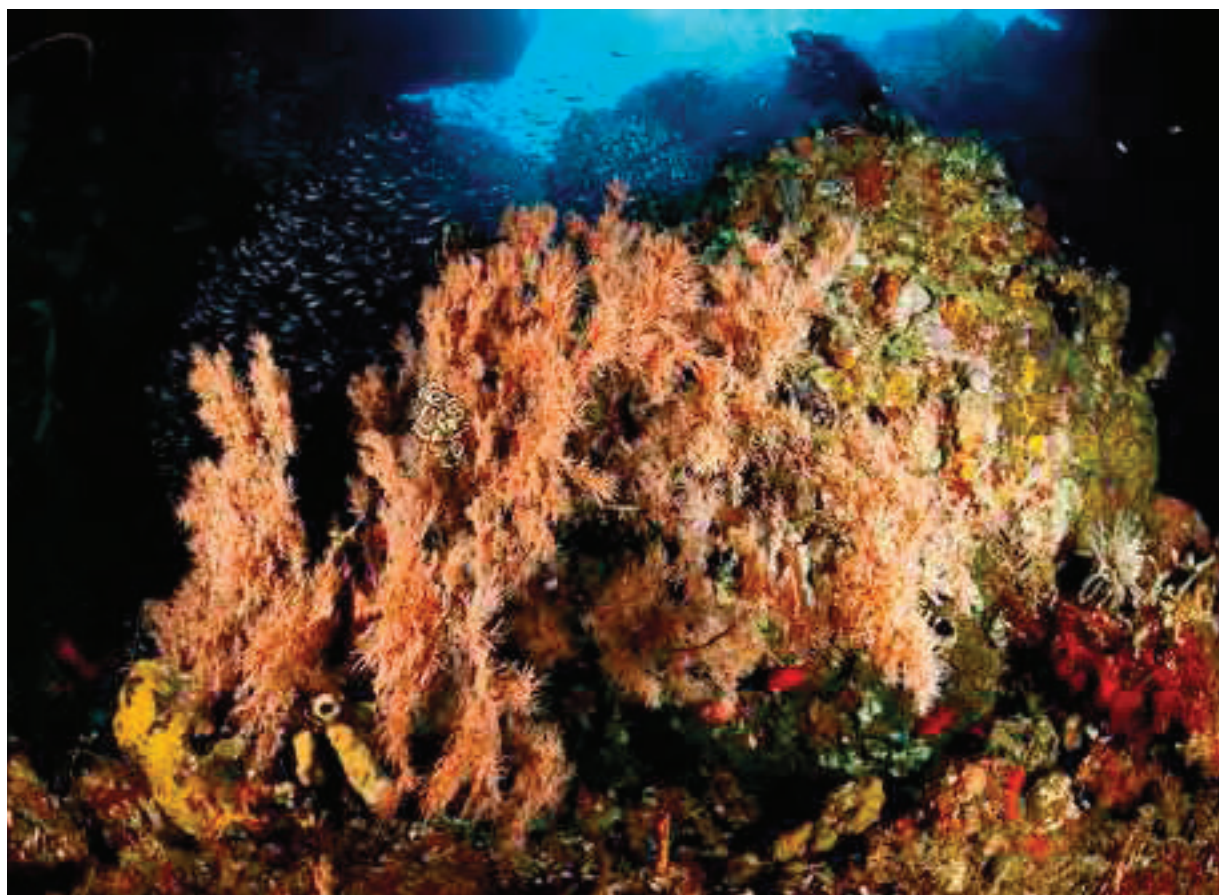
as the Indonesian Army moved in to seize control and restore order.

It took well over two years before tempers cooled and order was fully restored, and by 2004, a strong recovery was underway, aided by significant investments into the area by the Indonesian government.

Diving Ambon

Before the troubles, Ambon had an excellent reputation as a remote but first-rate dive location, and the Ambon Dive Center run by Carol Palmer and Sonny Tjandra, had built up a strong and loyal following.

Located about 30 minutes southeast of Ambon City, at a pleasant beach-side location near the village of Latuhalaton on the Letimar Peninsula, the dive center provided meals and accommodation as well as a base from which to explore the



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
Anemone fish; Inside
Hurikila Cave and superb
sea fans at Pintu Kota on
Ambon's South Coast

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THE SPICE TRADE

Now known as the province of Maluku, the remote Moluccas with its lush tropical climate and rich volcanic soil was where the exotic spices of cloves, mace and nutmeg first originated.

Today, these and other spices are a common supermarket commodity. But in the 15th century, they were so valuable that they were the driving force behind the Age of Exploration—a 200-year period when the major powers of Europe dispatched their sailing ships to find and control the fabled Spice Islands of the Far East.

Small quantities of spices from the Moluccas had first trickled into Europe via the so-called “overland route” through India and the Arabian Peninsula during the Middle Ages. Initially used by wealthy families to improve the taste of poorly preserved meat, over time, the spices were perceived to offer a degree of protection against the deadly plagues that periodically ravaged Europe, which further inflated their already exorbitant price!

Possibly the first really global commodity, control of the source of the spice supply was the key to enormous profits. The mission given to the ships' captains by their sponsors, was to find a sea route to the Spice Islands and break the Arab monopoly. In that process, Christopher Columbus discovered the New World of the Americas, Ferdinand Magellan's expedition circumnavigated the world for the first time, and Vasco Da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope at the tip of Africa and established the sea route to the Indian sub-continent.

In terms of their influence on the world economy today, the Moluccas are a mere shadow of their former glory, but are a fascinating place to visit for anyone with a sense of history. ■



LEFT TO RIGHT: Flamboyant cuttle fish; Purple *Rhinopias* at Rhino City; Pair of omate ghost pipe fish

30+ dive sites that Carol and Sonny had identified.

Unfortunately, the riots brought all that to a sad end, and the dive center had to close down in early 2000. When the troubles subsided in 2002, and the military restrictions on the area relaxed, it became possible to dive the area again, but only on the various liveaboard dive boats that work the area on their way to Raja Ampat.

Then in July 2005, expat Englishman Andy Shorten and

his partners took over the lease on the Ambon Dive Centre and reopened the operation as Maluku Divers.

It was Andy whom we contacted after arriving safely in Ambon and had recovered our appetite for the water again. The top of his list of potential dive sites was the Twilight Zone.

The Twilight Zone

Christened by American dive explorers Burt Jones and Maureen Shimlock after a

chance exploration dive in 1994 while waiting to pick up incoming passengers for a trip on the liveaboard MV *Cehili*, the Twilight Zone is the area under and around the aviation jetty at the village of Laha near Ambon's airport.

The jetty was built to allow aviation fuel to be unloaded from tankers for the airport, but has become home to a fleet of fishing boats that work the rich waters around Ambon and southwards into the Banda

Sea.

The Twilight Zone really is a special place and probably the most appropriately named dive site I have ever had the pleasure of visiting—think Alfred Hitchcock meets the Lembeh Strait.

The black volcanic sand is covered in a dense mixture of organic and inorganic waste,

while above, the fishing boats moored alongside each other block out the sun, as their diesel generators create a steady but penetrating deep throbbing noise.

The inorganic debris is a mixture of car tires, filing cabinet drawers and other assorted flotsam and jetsam, which has been discarded over the years



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CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Beautiful Sea horse; Above water at the Twilight Zone; Maluku Divers guest bungalows; The restaurant area at Maluku Divers



and created an underwater junkyard. The organic waste comes from fish carcasses, which are simply thrown over the side of the fishing boats after their crews have cleaned and filleted their catches for shipment to Bali.

The junkyard is now home to an amazing assortment of critters, fish and the most numerous moray eels I have personally ever seen in one location. The whole population is well fed from the fish carcasses.

We dived the Twilight Zone several times. I was so impressed that I arranged to spend four days with Maluku Divers

the following year when I went back to Ambon in transit to the Banda Islands. Operating as it did from the old Ambon Dive Center on the Letimar Peninsular meant regular crossings over the wide harbor to get to the Twilight Zone as well as other sites on the western side of the bay.

It has to be said that the dive center was really showing its age. Nonetheless, I very much enjoyed the diving and saw a really great selection of critters.

The new Maluku Divers

Let's fast forward to 2011 and a chance encounter with Andy Shorten on Facebook, who regaled me with stories about all the new sites they have found now that Maluku Divers had migrated across the harbor—just down the shore from the Twilight Zone!

I just had to go back. So, in December I did just that, spending ten days diving both the old and the new sites and greatly enjoying the new resort, with its very nice restaurant, large dedicated camera preparation room and well-

appointed rooms.

The resort is run by Dutch expatriate Marcel Hagendijk and his crew of experienced Ambonese, who are, to his great credit, a well-balanced mixture of Muslim and Christians all very well versed in the basic requirement to get on well and ensure that the guests get to see what they came for.

Critter dive sites

Twilight Zone. No discussion about diving Ambon can be complete without reference to this unique site and, in particular, the photographic opportunities here. The jetty can be thought of as the epicenter of about 100m of sloping sandy shoreline around a small sheltered bay, which offers protection for both the ships at anchor and the critters that inhabit the netherworld beneath the surface.

The thing that is really special about the Twilight Zone is that it is really two



Sea whip crab (left); Leaf scorpionfish (bottom right); Cuttle fish in warning display (center)

West side of Ambon Bay. Maluku Divers have now identified a total of 18 sites on the west side, huge bay that forms Ambon's natural harbor, starting with Mimic Point in the north, near the newly identified "shipwreck", and ending in the

south at Bata Badiri. Many of the sites are named after the specific critters that are found there—such as Mandarin City on the edge of the Twilight Zone, or one of my other favorites—Rhino City.

Dive master Marcel Hagendijk



gaps in between the moored fishing boats and around the jetty itself. This intense light seems to excite the large resident shoal of silversides, which normally hide away under the jetty. They stream around the pillars of the jetty and out underneath the fishing boats.

A similar thing seems to happen with the large colony of catfish, who also get a little agitated and start to do things out of character. This provides excellent wide-angle photo opportunities.

Then, there are the moray eels who come out of their daytime hideaways, seemingly disturbed by all the commotion and provide excellent foreground subjects for the creepy background. Add in all the other larger critters such as scorpionfish and stonefish, and one can understand why midday at the Twilight Zone is one of my favorite places—not just in Ambon, but in Indonesia. It's that special!

At night, the sight transforms again as the fish and critters active during the daytime settle down for the night in their hiding holes, and the nocturnal predators emerge. Extra care needs to be taken at night, as there are so many potentially stinging and poisonous things to kneel on such as stonefish, a profusion of scorpionfish—including lots of the Ambon variety—dozens of urchins around the junkyard area, and of course, the morays, which may be out foraging.

sites—the mother of all muck sites most of the time, and then around midday, it transforms itself into a kind of unique and eerie wide-angle photography studio where you can practice all those techniques you've read about.

For a couple of hours around noon the bright Indonesian sun is overhead and sends beams of light down through the



Blue ribbon eel



LEFT TO RIGHT: A tiny blenny blends in; Saron shrimp at Amahusu; Moray eel peers from its lair; Diminutive orangutan crab



and his team dive all these sites regularly and know the current status of what is there depending on the time of year, as water temperature directly impacts what critters are around, and will adjust the diving program around the specific things you want to see.

The area around the village of Laha, where Maluku Divers is located, is a particularly “target-rich” environment for critter spotters and photographers.

Besides the Twilight Zone itself and Mandarin City, there is Laha itself, which hosts a variety of things to see, and Rhino City, which has been known to have up to six resident *Rhinopias* scorpionfish at certain times of the year. It was down to “just” three when I was there!

East side of Ambon Bay. There are less sites on the east side of the bay, with a total of

seven identified and dived regularly, with Amahusu and the nearby Dark Blue Jetty being the most prolific.

Amahusu, with its resident colony of very photogenic Saron shrimps, was my personal favorite. These shrimps, which are rarely seen, make excellent photo subjects with their Captain America stars and stripes liveries!

The diving at all of the sites on both the west and east sides requires much the same diving discipline, as they are all located on the fairly steep slopes of the bay. So, care is needed with buoyancy skills to make sure you can hover above your subject matter. Plus, there are often strong currents running in the bay, which need to be heeded.

The shipwreck

I love critter diving as much as anybody,

but after several days of macro photography, I found myself gazing longingly at the wide-angle lenses in my camera bag. The quickest way to satisfy that urge in Ambon is a dive on the mysterious “shipwreck” located on the western side of the bay close to the state oil company Pertamina’s main jetty.

Marked by a large but rather rusty buoy attached to the stem, which is in just 12m of water, the wreck is 100m in length and lies facing down the slope of the



harbor with its foredeck at 32m and the bow in over 40m. Very little was known about the wreck, but as with many things in Indonesia, there were no shortage of



rumors and tales about it.

One such story was that the wreck is the remains of a Dutch cargo ship scuttled deliberately during WWII to prevent it from falling into Japanese hands, while another is that it was bombed and sunk by a single bomb dropped down its funnel by a (very good) mercenary pilot during civil strife in the 1950's.

Dive master Marcel Hagendijk is a wreck fanatic and conducted a series of penetration dives inside the shipwreck. He found a plaque in the engine room that identified the ship as the *Duke of Sparta*, built in 1940 at the William Gray shipyard in West Hatlepool in the north-east of England. Sold in 1951 to the Grimaldi brothers in Naples, the *Duke of*

Sparta was renamed the *SS Aquilo*. Marcel established that the ship was bombed in Ambon's harbor during Operation Haik—a clandestine Cold War CIA operation against Indonesian communist rebels in 1958.

The initial bombing did significant damage to



the *Aquilo*, but not enough to sink her. It was another month before she finally went down on May 27.

The shipwreck being located in the harbor meant that visibility was not that great and varied between 10-15m. But the wreck is still very much intact, and all its features are clearly identifiable. Soft and hard corals have grown abundantly on the wreck, making it a very nice alternative dive if you are a little crittered out.

The south coast

Another good antidote to an excess of critter diving, and an excellent excuse to

dust off the wide-angle lenses, is a trip along the south coast to Pintu Kota and Hukunila Cave.

Pintu Kota means Gate of the City, in Bahasa Indonesia, and is located on a small headland about an hour's boat ride along the south coast from the entrance to Ambon's harbor. It gets its name from the several large archways that honeycomb the headland. The archways create an impression of large doorways that lead into a huge inner cathedral-like chamber.

Underwater, there is a very large archway at 17m that mirrors the ones above water. This archway and the healthy surrounding reef and clear blue water, combined with the overall ambience created by the streams of sunlight penetrating down through the above water chambers, create a wonderful environment in which to use your widest wide-angle lens.

Hukunila Cave is further east along the coast from Pintu Kota and is another small honeycombed headland, which hosts a particularly interesting twisting chimney that is best entered from the top. The large passageways provide several interesting photo-opportunities with large sponges and archways against which to frame your model.

At the bottom, there are three exits to

Coral crab;
Omate ghost
pipe fish (far
left); Beautiful
paddle-flap
scorpionfish
at Rhino City
(center)

Ambon

explore. One large exit hosts some very luxuriant gorgonian fans and sea whips, which can be showcased against the blue water from above.

Both Pintu Kota and Hukunila Cave are must-do dives and the minimum sites you should consider along the south coast. But, there are a total of ten other sites identified sites that are possible to dive

on a day boat.

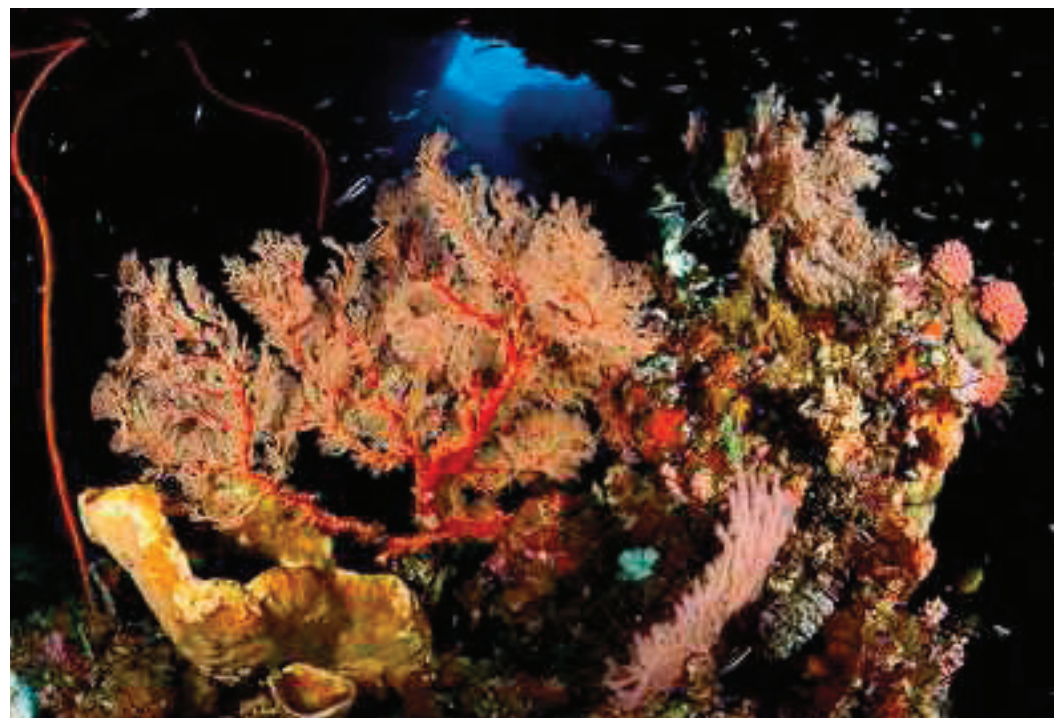
Afterthoughts

All in all, Ambon offers a terrific combination of probably the best critter diving anywhere in Indonesia, apart from the Lembeh Strait, together with an interesting shipwreck and some great coastal dive sites. Add in the excellent new Maluku Divers resort, plus the unique spice trade history, and it's easy to understand why it is so high on the "bucket list" of places to experience in the vast archipelago that is Indonesia. ■

Don Silcock is a dive writer and underwater photographer based in Sydney, Australia. For more information, visit: www.indopacificimages.com



Stone fish



Inside Hukunila Cave on Ambon's South Coast



SOURCES: US CIA WORLD FACTBOOK
SCUBADOC.COM, E-MED.CO.UK

fact file

Indonesia



History In the early 17th century, the Dutch began to colonize Indonesia. During WWII, the islands were occupied by Japan. After Japan's surrender, Indonesia declared its independence, but four more years passed with intermittent negotiations, recurring hostilities, and U.N. mediation before the Netherlands let go of its colony. Home to the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia is the world's largest archipelagic state. Its government faces several challenges including alleviating poverty, preventing terrorism, consolidating democracy after 40 years of authoritarianism, reforming the financial sector, eradicating corruption, halting human rights violations by the military and police, and controlling avian influenza. Indonesia reached a historic peace agreement with armed separatists in Aceh in 2005, which led to democratic elections in December 2006. In Papua, a low intensity separatist movement continues to confront Indonesia. Government: republic. Capital of Indonesia: Jakarta. Main city of Ambon: Ambon City.

Geography Indonesia is located in Southeast Asia. It is an archipelago between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, which consists of 17,508 islands, of which 6,000

are inhabited and the country is approximately three times the size of Texas. Indonesia straddles the equator and has a strategic location along major sea lanes from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. The terrain is mostly coastal lowlands with interior mountains on the larger islands. The lowest point is the Indian Ocean at 0m, and the highest point is Puncak Jaya at 5,030m.

Climate Tropical, hot and humid. Temperatures range from a high of 31°C (88°F) to 25°C (78°F) low. Highlands are cooler and drier. Lowlands along the coast are pleasantly drier than the main tourist areas in the south. Monsoons: the dry season takes place April through November, and the wet season, December through March. Natural hazards include occasional floods, severe droughts, tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanoes and forest fires.

Economy Indonesia is a vast polyglot nation, which grew an estimated 6.1% and 6.4% in 2010 and 2011, respectively. The government made economic advances under the first administration of President Yudhoyono

(2004-09), introducing significant reforms in the financial sector, including tax and customs reforms, the use of Treasury bills, and capital market development and supervision. During the global financial crisis, Indonesia outperformed its regional neighbors and joined China and India as the only G20 members posting growth in 2009. The government has promoted fiscally conservative policies, resulting in a debt-to-GDP ratio of less than 25%, a small current account surplus, a fiscal deficit below 2%, and historically low rates of inflation. Fitch and Moody's upgraded

RIGHT: Location of
Ambon on global map
BELOW: Location of
Ambon on map of
Indonesia
BOTTOM RIGHT
"Deep Throat"



Indonesia's credit rating to investment grade in December 2011. Indonesia still struggles with poverty and unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, corruption, a complex regulatory environment, and unequal resource distribution among regions. The government in 2012

faces the ongoing challenge of improving Indonesia's insufficient infrastructure to remove impediments to economic growth, labor unrest over wages, and reducing its fuel subsidy program in the face of rising oil prices.

Population 248,216,193 (July 2011 est.) Ethnic groups: Javanese 45%, Sundanese 14%, Madurese 7.5%, coastal Malays 7.5%, other ethnic groups 26%. Religions: Muslim 88%, Protestant 5%, Roman Catholic 3%, Hindu 2%, Buddhist 1%, other religions 1% (1998) Internet users: 16 million

Language Bahasa Indonesia is the official language and is a modified form of Malay. Other languages spoken: English, Dutch, local dialects (Javanese is the most common)

Health Be prepared and get your shots before you go to Indonesia. There is a high degree of risk for food or water-borne diseases including bacterial and protozoal diarrhea, hepatitis A and E, and typhoid fever. There is also a risk for vector-borne diseases in some locations. These diseases include dengue fever, malaria and chikungunya. Bird flu, or highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza, has been identified among birds in Indonesia. It poses a very low risk, but check with your doctor before you go.

Environmental Issues Deforestation, sewage, industrial water pollution, urban air pollution, forest fire smoke and haze

Visa Travelers from most Western countries do not need a visa and are automatically given a 30 day stay permit upon arrival. Passports must be valid for at least six months upon arrival in Indonesia. Indonesian immigration is very strict. No work is permitted while visiting on a tourist visa.

Indonesian Law Very hard on drug offenders; the death penalty is regularly applied on narcotic couriers.

Diver's License A valid international driving license is required. Rental car insurance is

highly recommended. Drive carefully. Traffic rules are not followed as well as in the West. Accidents are frequent.

Currency Indonesian Rupiah (IDR). Exchange rate: 1EUR=10,002 IDR; 1USD=9132IDR; 1GBP=14537IDR; 1AUD=9,500IDR; 1SGD=7,316IDR. Credit cards are accepted by most higher end resorts and businesses. Payment in U.S. dollars and traveller's checks is widely accepted.

Decompression Chambers

Ambon. Rumah Sakit Angkatan Laut (RSAL) Halong, Ambon Tel. 62-911-52152

Bali. Sanglah General Hospital, USUP Sanglah Denpasar, Jl. Diponegoro, Denpasar 80114 Bali Tel. 62-361-227911

www.sanglahbalihospital.com

Jakarta. Rumah Sakit Angkatan Laut (Navy Hospital) Mintoharjo in Jl. Bendungan Hilir No.17, Central Jakarta. Tel. 021-5703081

Web sites

Indonesia Tourism

www.indonesia-tourism.com

Maluku Divers Divingmaluku.com

