

# SPICE ISLANDS ADVENTURES

## *diving the Banda Sea*

**I**t seems almost beyond belief that some 360 years ago, one of a cluster of ten small and very isolated volcanic islands at the remote eastern end of what was then called the Malay Archipelago was so valuable that it was exchanged for New York's Manhattan Island.

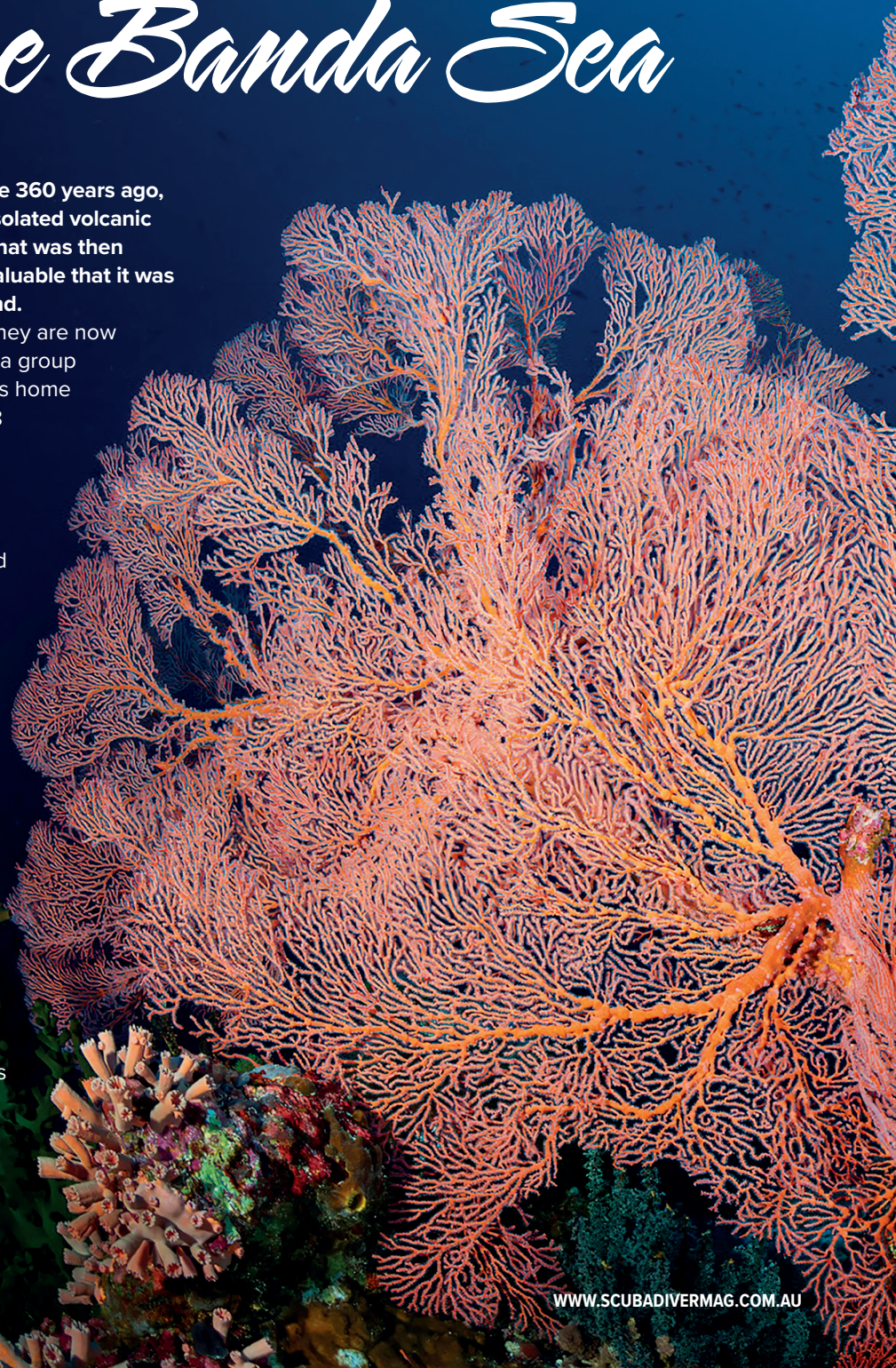
Those ten islands are the Bandas, and they are now part of the Indonesian province of Maluku, a group of around 1,000 islands which even today is home to just two million of Indonesia's nearly 278 million people.

Often referred to as the 'spice islands', Maluku was the source of the incredibly valuable spices that were in great demand in Europe up until the late 18th century. And the Banda Islands were the world's only source of nutmeg and mace - coveted commodities that commanded exorbitant prices in European markets.

### **A rich history**

During the Middle Ages, spices from Maluku found their way into Europe in limited quantities and became highly prized by the wealthy for enhancing the flavours of poorly preserved meats and potentially offering protection against deadly plagues. The Republic of Venice's dominance in the 12th century, together with its control of key Mediterranean trade routes, created a 300-year monopoly on the spice trade, orchestrated through strategic partnerships with Arabic traders.

Those armed and formidable traders controlled the profitable land route across the Arabian Peninsula to the Mediterranean, and they deliberately ▶



# AND



## *Did you know?*

The Banda Sea is one of four seas that surround the Maluku Islands of Indonesia, connected to the Pacific Ocean, but surrounded by hundreds of islands, including Timor, as well as the Halmahera and Ceram Seas.

**Don Silcock explores the Banda Islands, part of the Indonesian province of Maluku**

Photographs by Don Silcock

restricted the flow of spices to Venetian markets to inflate prices and profits. They also fostered an air of mystery and intrigue around the spice islands to deter competition.

The rise of the Ottoman Empire and the capture of Constantinople in 1453 led to the closure of the land route, ending Venice's monopoly, and initiating the age of exploration. Over the next two centuries, the European powers embarked on maritime expeditions in search of the sources of those spices, and this saw Christopher Columbus' voyage leading to the discovery of the Americas, Ferdinand Magellan's crew achieving the first circumnavigation of the globe, and Vasco da Gama pioneering the sea route to the Indian subcontinent by rounding the Cape of Good Hope for the first time.

### The ruthless Dutch...

The Portuguese were the first to reach the Maluku and assert control of the spice trade, leveraging the immense profits to fuel their ambitions for a global colonial empire.

Then in 1599, the Dutch arrived with superior naval technology, reinforced by substantial financial backing. And in less than one year they had ruthlessly ousted the Portuguese and seized total control over the region and the spice trade. The British arrived next and set up their East Indies Company as the arch-rival to the Dutch East Indies Company to try and take over the spice trade.

Although both 'companies' existed to make money, they were basically extensions of their governments and the result was a prolonged struggle, during which the British seized and occupied the small island of Run in the Banda Islands - renowned for its abundant nutmeg trees.

However, the Dutch had the more-powerful ships and significantly outnumbered the British and in 1667, the Treaty of Breda brought an end to hostilities. So determined were the Dutch to regain control of Run and its precious nutmeg, they agreed to cede the island of New Amsterdam in the New World to the British.

New Amsterdam is now known as Manhattan Island...



The colourful reefs are teeming with life



Divers having fun through a swim-through



Turtle close-up

“ Literally everywhere you look is densely packed with beautiful cabbage and staghorn coral and the area is a must-do dive when in Banda Neir ”



## Did you know?

An underwater ridge divides the basins of the Banda Sea. The ridge is also covered with beautiful coral reefs in some places. The northern basin of the Banda Sea is around 5,800m deep and the Southern Basin has a depth of 5,400m.

The aerial views are just stunning

### The incredible Banda Sea

The Banda Sea is what oceanographers refer to as a 'marginal sea' because it is partially enclosed by land but also connected to a larger ocean or sea.

Marginal seas are of significant interest to marine biologists because they often have unique environmental conditions, biodiversity, and ecological processes compared to open ocean environments. For example, the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, the Sea of Japan, and the Bering Sea are all marginal seas that play important roles in regional climates, biodiversity, and fisheries.

The Banda Sea is particularly interesting because of its huge size – roughly 10% bigger than the Red Sea, but much, much deeper at over 7km in places. And it is renowned for its extensive and highly diverse coral reef systems, together with a vast array of fish species.

It also hosts several species of marine mammals like dolphins, whales and dugongs, plus sperm and blue whales are known to inhabit the deeper waters of the Banda Sea.

### The Banda Islands

This cluster of ten islands is the result of the intense volcanic activity created by the convergence and collision of tectonic plates over millions of years. The islands rise from the depths of the North Banda Basin and are part of the Banda Arc of volcanic islands and seamounts that extends along the northern margin of the basin.

The tremendous fertility of the volcanic matter that created the islands is probably best illustrated by what is underwater at the 'lava flows' on the southwest corner of Gunung Api – the periodically active volcano that dominates the main island of Banda Neira. The volcano erupted last in 1988 and resulted in the evacuation of the 1,800 people who lived on the flanks of the volcano, along with almost all the 6,000 residents of Banda Neira.

Molten lava flowed down the side of Gunung Api in three locations, but the worst affected was the southwest corner and the scars from that are still clearly visible to this day.

Underwater, a similar impact occurred as the lava cooled and solidified and it must have looked like Ground Zero!

### Hard corals and mandarins

35 years on from that eruption it is hard to imagine a larger, more intense, and healthy area of hard coral than the one at the lava flows. Literally everywhere you look is densely packed with beautiful cabbage and staghorn coral and the area is a must-do dive when in Banda Neira.

The other must-do dive in Banda Neira is at dusk near the main jetty, in front of the Hotel Maulana, where in about 7m numerous rectangular concrete posts have been dumped to reinforce the harbour wall.

Resident in among those posts is a large colony of mandarinfish that remains mostly hidden during the day, but as the light starts to fade pairs of these beautiful dragonets rise into the water column to mate.

It's a spectacular display to watch and after it is over, the overall area is a good night dive!

### Walls, reefs and blue water

There are many great dive sites in the ten islands of the Bandas but the ones that really stand out are some of those on Hatta, Ai and Big Banda Islands.

Characterized by stunning walls and beautiful, healthy ▶



Huge barrel sponges

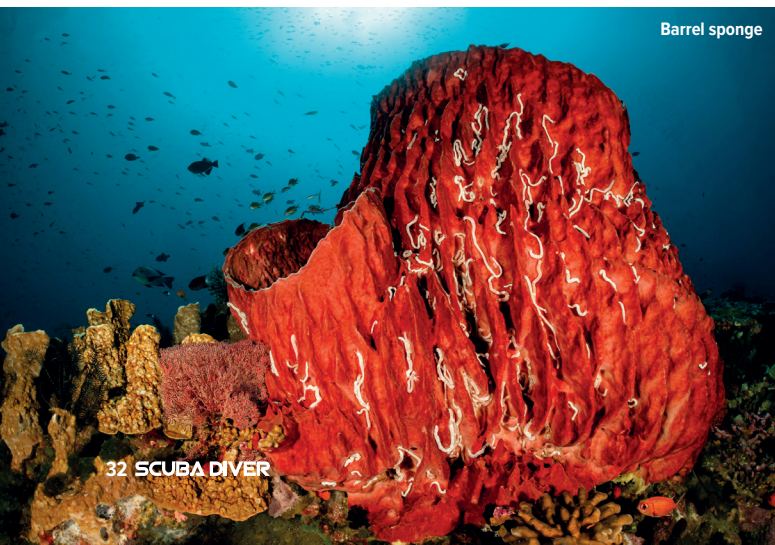


Coral and sponge growth is phenomenal



Mandarinfish

“ Their isolation in such deep water means they act like beacons to large pelagic creatures like the hammerheads and oceanic mantas ”



Barrel sponge

reefs with huge barrel sponges and superb corals, visibility on these sites is typically at least 30 metres but often much more and they are a delight to dive and explore.

My personal favourites are the exceptional cave and swim through at Pohon Miring on Big Banda Island and the sensational reef at Kurang Hatta on Hatta Island.

### The big dogs – Suanggi and Manuk

Both these sites are very much weather dependent as they are in open water well away from the shelter of the Banda Islands, but if the weather gods are smiling down on you, they really are essential diving.

Both are the visible tips of seamounts that rise from the depths, with Suanggi some 33km to the northwest of Banda Neira, while Manuk is 120km to the southeast.

Their isolation in such deep water means they act like beacons to large pelagic creatures like hammerheads and oceanic mantas, but if the big dogs don't show then you can concentrate on the excellent reefs and the resident populations of banded and olive sea snakes!

### How to dive the Banda Sea?

It is possible to dive the Banda Islands from Banda Neira as there is now a dive operation based there that is open during the season. Which means either flying from Ambon or, if you are adventurous, taking the ferry from Ambon.

For me though a liveaboard is the much better option, and departing from Ambon will allow you to sample the excellent critter diving in the main harbour, plus some of the superb sites like Nusa Laut on the south coast of Ambon before heading for the Banda Islands.

Physically the Bandas are located some 250km south-east of Ambon and it's typically an overnight sail to get to Banda Neira. And, once there, the other big advantage of a liveaboard becomes obvious as the best sites for the prevailing weather can be dived easily, and access to Manuk and Suanggi is relatively easy and safe.

The alternative to Ambon is sailing across the Banda Sea from Maumere, or one of the other main ports in the Lesser Sunda islands, which form the southern boundary of the Indonesian Archipelago. That means a long journey of over 1,000km, through a lot of open water, with almost nowhere to shelter should the weather turn nasty.

### In summary...

The Banda Sea is an intriguing location that offers a quite different experience to the other major Indonesian dive locations like Raja Ampat or Komodo.

It has an amazing variety of things to see, and the overall setting is simply incredible and it's almost worth a trip there just to see and appreciate the history of the Banda Islands.

My most recent trip was my sixth and I hope to be going back soon to search for blue whales and sperm whales. ■

### Don Silcock

Don is Scuba Diver's Senior Travel Editor and is based on Bali in Indonesia. His website has extensive location guides, articles and images on some of the best diving locations in the Indo-Pacific region and 'big animal' experiences globally.

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