



## **Ambon to Flores. Banda Sea with Seven Seas, April 27 - May 13 2016**

*By Wendy Morris. Photos by Wendy Morris & Hayley Baillie.*

An eclectic group from all over the world converged aboard Seven Seas in Ambon to join underwater pioneer and still elegant explorer, Valerie Taylor on a 16 day voyage through the rarely visited inner arc of the tiny islands of the Banda Sea. Valerie and her husband Ron were made honorary citizens of Banda 25 years ago when they spent several weeks in the area. Since then Valerie has returned more times than she can remember, bringing again some old friends and making some new ones, on one of the most spectacular underwater adventures on the planet.







The reason this itinerary is so special is that the Banda Sea is close to the Wallace Line (named after Alfred Russell Wallace who is revered by many as the original "thinker" on evolution and the mechanisms by which it occurs (survival of the fittest). Here is where the Indian Ocean meets the Pacific in a swirling mass of life - a cauldron of genetic diversity that is a key refuge for much of our coral reef fauna for both oceans. Rich in every form of tropical marine life through its varied habitats, its deep trenches and reef arcs have been a haven during previous climate and sea level changes for millennia.

For an extraordinary 16 days our voyage crossed sapphire expanses of ocean, "Banda Blue", to spend each day exploring the grand in scale, the minute and the everything in between - of the marine world.

Steaming at night, the ship would approach a new island in soft dawn light - with hovering birds and jumping fish hinting at another day, yet again, of spectacular diving. The routine was simple. Wake. Eat. Dive. Eat. Dive. Eat. Dive. Eat & enjoy another fabulous meal - then crash in bed before doing it all again the next day. On many occasions the routine had some memorable interruptions.....

Pilot whales before breakfast! A pod of many dozens off the island of Teun - half way along the inner arc - and jumping into thousands of meters of deep blue to hear their singing and catch a special glimpse of these toothy hunters of the deep.

Waking to steaming volcanoes dripping with lush forest to turquoise of reef waters. Soon flipping backwards with a tank on, peering skywards into frothing bubbles that clear as you turn down to see aqua water fusing into the dark purple of the forever deep off the reef. Banded sea snakes or Kraits twisting to the surface for a breath then winding back down to find a crevice that might have a hidden fish in it. Or accepting with nonchalance as a diver's gentle hand reaches out to caress its smooth scales.





Our morning at Perai village in Wetar started with a crocodile sighting on the beach near the boat - and finished with a "critter dive" in the afternoon with a 3+ metre croc appearing on the surface just 50m from where we'd been diving! Such is life diving in the Forgotten islands.

Our world for 16 days has been a kaleidoscope of colour. Coral walls plunging into the blue. Pink anthids and blue fusiliers. Thousands of Pyramid Butterflyfish and Black Triggers. Looking closer, a tiny microscopic crab, candy pink stripes with spiny bumps and a cautious eye, gripping with multiple sharp legs to its host soft coral, a near perfect colour match. The brilliant lime green of yet another little shrimp hiding within the cirri (feet) of its host Feather Star. Sculpted corals with miniature spires crowning each individual polyp. A world where Gauguin's palette is painted on a daVinci architecture. All this below us then glancing up to the blue to watch the elegant glide of an Eagle Ray as it drifts out in calm flight, going somewhere, but not in a hurry.

Muck dives at night with all hues of Scorpionfish, cuttlefish and octopus. Daisy Coral's bright yellow flowers and giant sleeping Maori Wrasse tucked into coral crevices like a hibernating bear.

Sadly the reef sharks that are a natural part of reef systems are rarely seen now anywhere in Indonesia. The shark fin fishery has devastated their populations. Even in some of the most isolated places we visited, we found evidence of dynamiting for fish and finding abundant large fish such as grouper or emperors was rare. Educational, conservation-minded tourism such as the Seven Seas,



has the potential to bring an alternative revenue stream to these islands, putting an economic value on their biodiversity and uniqueness.



The people of the islands we met are mostly water people - relying on the ocean for subsistence in a state of relative poverty. Shy smiling kids paddling their canoes with a natural grace and strength that no yoga class can replicate. We met the ancient Abui tribe at Alor - small statured, wiry mountain people with an ancient heritage passed down as oral history dating back 300BC. Friendly, welcoming and with skills and empathy with nature we can all learn from.

Cruise directors Karl and Linda have a wealth of experience and knowledge, ensuring each day was filled to the max with the very best of each spot we visited. Our dive guides, Jeffrey, Tamarind, Irwane - helped us find the tiny endemic creatures that these reef's held like hidden jewels amongst the sea fans and corals, feather stars and rubble. We ate spectacularly well - local delicacies and good solid dive food. In every respect we could not have asked for more aboard ship.

Valerie is a remarkable woman and explorer. She sets the benchmark for women underwater - tough and with a keenly observant eye, she remains a role model for anyone who loves the magic world beneath the sea. The whole team on board in fact were a crazy, remarkable funny group of people coming from as far afield as Norway and the US as well as the more local Aussie contingent. The accumulated underwater hours of the group would be off the scale. Underwater stunt women, dive



instructors and photographers, actors, businessmen and our revered onboard Dr Sarah - ear inspector and nurse extraordinaire. If a boat brings out the best and worst in people then I couldn't think of a better bunch to be stuck at sea with for 16 days.



The closer we look the more we see. Each fish or critter is a cog in the giant wheel of the reef system. Everything is connected, above and below water. This is why it's important for people to have the opportunity to see such places and observe nature's remarkable hand. With personal experience we become aware. When we're aware we care. And when we care we conserve, everyday, and each in our own small way wherever we live. It was a privilege to be aboard the Seven Seas in this special place with such a great group of people. Bring on the next adventure!

Wendy Morris  
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