



East of Flores - From An Underwater Photographer's Perspective

Trip Report & photos by Renee Grinnell Capozzola.

As I boarded the plane to start the long journey to Flores, I knew I was about to start a new and exciting adventure, -- but what I didn't know was how amazingly diverse the experience and immaculate the reefs would be on the Seven Seas liveaboard. I was joining the "East of Flores" trip, which includes several remote islands between east Flores and Alor and features numerous dive sites that are both completely unspoiled and unknown to most people. It is entirely off the beaten path with the Seven Seas vessel being the only boat around, apart from a few local fishing boats. In addition to spectacular diving and snorkeling, we also had the opportunity to visit several fascinating villages and some breathtaking beaches. In sum, the Seven Seas is the finest ship I have ever sailed on and the best organized dive trip I have taken out of my 13 years of diving around the world!

After arriving in Maumere, we were picked up by Karl, the friendly and outgoing cruise director along with several crew who quickly picked up our bags and shuttled us to the ship, which we all were anxiously awaiting to board. The Seven Seas is an impressive and traditionally built Buginese schooner, custom-designed to accommodate up to 16 guests in 8 air conditioned cabins with large public areas over three decks. As a photographer, I really appreciated the large camera table on the spacious dive deck as well as another working area inside the dining area with several outlets to charge all my camera gear. If that wasn't already enough, there were additional global power strips in each stateroom. I also was pleased to find the roomy area provided to store our dive gear and dry our swim wear. Finally, the upstairs dining and lounging area was a really nice way to finish the day with a glass of wine, the sunset, and then dinner under the stars.

After a checkout dive and steam into the night, we began our real adventure the next morning at **Adonara Island**. The highlight of this area was the "**Ipet Drop Off**" dive site which is a wide angle photographer's dream and similar to the current swept dives I had experienced recently in Fiji. The

ridge was covered with hard and soft corals, giant sponges, anemones, crinoids, and so many clouds of fish they were hard to see through! As I swam with my camera along the drop off, I was overwhelmed by the massive density of fish life and had a hard time deciding which way to point my camera, which is a good problem to have. I was pleased that I had chosen a fisheye lens to cover as much area as possible of the beautiful scenery. In this area, we also saw several whitetip sharks, eagle rays, dogtooth tuna, giant trevally, a large zebra shark, and massive shoals of anthias.



The next morning, we woke up to an amazing sunrise over **Komba Volcano** which is located in the Banda Sea northeast of Flores and is still emitting plumes of smoke! As the sun came up, it lit up the face of the volcano with intense yellow-orange light, providing us with the rare opportunity to capture stunning images as we were also the only boat in the area. As soon as the sun was up, a few of us by request were dropped off by the small boat to snorkel in the blue right in front of the volcano which was an excellent opportunity to capture some over-under shots! Shortly afterwards, we performed two dives towards one tip of the volcano known as "**Alice In Wonderland**" which featured healthy hard corals contrasted against black sand in shallow water. There was abundant marine life in this area as well as the nearby drop off, which housed large sea fans and a diversity of fish life.

We started our third morning with a visit to **Lamalera Village** which is one of the last traditional whaling cultures anywhere in the world. Here, the inhabitants maintain an approximate 400 + year-old ritual of hunting whales with hand-made wooden harpoons. These people are exempt from the international whaling moratorium and use all parts of their catch for their sustenance. It was fascinating to learn how these people live and practice their ancient traditions. After lunch, we dove a beautiful wall in the area which was covered with both hard and soft corals, sponges, anemones and abundant marine life. To finish off this exciting day, we were treated to a private excursion to one of the crew's village up in the hills. It was a pleasure to be welcomed into this local community with so many friendly people and children.



On the 4th day, we hit my personal highlight of this journey. We anchored at **"Watu Balu"** which I had read about before my trip and was anxiously awaiting. Watu Balu is an underwater paradise, especially for wide angle photographers. This site will take your breath away -- and exceeded all my expectations. Watu Balu is a small rocky islet by **Rusa Island** which houses one of the healthiest hard coral reefs I have ever seen as well as the most fish I have ever seen in one place! As soon as I put my face in the water, I was bombarded with so much stimulation it was hard to believe it was real! In the shallows, there is a short wall adorned with sponges and then a ledge with perfectly stacked massive table corals swarming with clouds of anthias. Not only are there wall-to-wall corals but there are literally wall-to-wall fish between the corals! Then as you descend a bit deeper, there are numerous bommies and coral heads also encompassed by millions of anthias and other fish. A few members of our dive group also saw a wobbegong shark and a large mola mola, but I was literally stuck to the coral heads with my camera like a piece of velcro so I missed them. We were lucky to not have too much current as this site can have some strong currents, but it's important to remember that the currents bring in the fish that make this site so spectacular. To top it off, Watu Balu is located opposite a spectacular talc white sand beach which we visited for sundowners.



Our next stop was at **Pantar Island** to visit a unique dive site called **"Alcatraz"** which features giant pink soft coral trees that reach approximately three feet in height and are spread throughout a field of white sand embedded with garden eels. Dropping down on these strange corals was like descending upon a foreign planet, unlike anything I've seen before. In addition to these soft corals, there is also a large wall covered with giant black coral trees, sponges, anemones and a beautiful crack towards the surface with tons of yellow corals. I wanted to linger at the crack, shooting upwards towards the light but was about out of air and couldn't stay any longer in this coral paradise.



After diving Alcatraz, the ship moved on to **"Beangabang"**, a world class muck diving site by **Pantar Island**. As a wide angle photographer who doesn't even own a macro lens - but rented one specifically for this trip - I was a bit apprehensive about finding and capturing images of such small creatures. However, the dive guides were so great about locating so many unusual critters throughout the first dive that I found myself wanting to quickly get back in for a second dive to find more of these strange aliens that I had never seen before. In just two dives, we encountered two seahorses, a baby yellow frogfish, a coconut octopus, two snake eels, a baby yellow filefish, multiple porcelain crabs and anemone shrimps, tons of clownfish and several other animals I didn't recognize.



Even though this was the first time I used a macro lens on my Canon 5D Mark III - the Canon EF 100mm f/2.8 - I was successful at getting some decent shots. It was a challenge to lock the focus at first - even with a focus light - because I wasn't used to such tiny objects, but with some practice, I got some pictures. For settings, I used a small aperture (f16-f22), low ISO (100-200) and high shutter speed (1/250) and kept my strobes close to the port.



If that wasn't enough excitement for one day, when we surfaced from our dive at Beangabang, there were numerous kids on the beach in front of their village throwing balloons up into the air. Although I didn't have a land lens at hand, I quickly snapped a few photos through my dome port. These happy children seemed to be everywhere we went and seeing them so carefree just prior to sunset was a perfect ending to a perfect day!

The next morning, we were at **South Pura Island**, in the Pantar Strait and about to dive "**Anemone City**" which is literally a city of Clark's clownfish residing in the biggest carpet of anemones I have ever seen. There are so many anemones that some don't even have clownfish! It was a difficult decision whether to use the wide angle fisheye lens or the macro lens, but ultimately, I chose the fisheye to capture more of the scenery. The water here was a bit colder than the other sites we had visited thus far so I was happy to be wearing my 5mm wetsuit as opposed the 3mm wetsuit I had been wearing previously. I spent the dive in the shallows admiring the endless parade of anemones and clownfish swaying in the current along with a variety of other fish, sponges, and corals.



After lunch, we got to snorkel with the many exuberant children of the **Solong Bali Village** which was another highlight of my trip. I chose to snorkel rather than dive because I wanted to capture some over-unders of the kids with their home-made goggles below the surface and the hand carved wooden boats above the surface. For these shots, I used a 15mm fisheye lens, a large dome port, and utilized a small aperture to get everything in focus. During this excursion, I got to interact with numerous kids who were so outgoing even though we didn't speak the same language. As soon as I took their pictures, they all wanted to quickly see the images on the LCD screen which I promptly showed them. It was also a real treat to see some of the boys demonstrate how they spearfish with hand-made wooden spears. After almost two hours, it was time to go and I reluctantly climbed into the boat as I could have stayed all day playing with these fun kids!



That afternoon, we were treated to another spectacular wall dive at "**Solong Bali**" which was densely covered with corals, giant sponges and anemones and accompanied with abundant marine life, lots of overhangs with fish hiding inside, and excellent visibility. I could see the dive guide pointing out small critters to the other divers but I was focused on obtaining wide angle shots of the wall. In fact, my dive buddy used a macro lens on this dive and was quite happy with her choice.



The next morning, we embarked on a four hour land excursion to the island of **Alor**, including a visit to the **Aboi Mountain Tribe**. This village, made up of people whose ancestors were head hunters, is located up in the hills of Alor. Here the people maintain long-established traditions including elaborate dancing and singing rituals which they performed for us. They also demonstrated how to chew the betal nut and asked for volunteers from our group - but no one wanted to try! Afterwards, we stopped at a local market bustling with shoppers and filled with fresh produce, fish, grains, and stalls with clothes and other odds and ends. After returning to the ship and having lunch, we strapped on our tanks at "**Mucky Mosque**" in search of the elusive Rhinopious. Within minutes, I heard one of the divemasters, Irwan, banging on his tank as he had already found a greenish-orange one sauntering along through the algae. If this wasn't enough, we also found two peacock mantis shrimp which was on my list to see!



We were now reaching the end of the trip and I thought we had probably already hit the best sites but I was delighted to wake up in front of another impressive volcano surrounded by stunning reefs on day 9! We were anchored at **Ili Wariran Volcano** at **North Lembata Island**. I elected to start the

morning snorkeling the shallow reefs -- as opposed to diving -- to capture some over-unders of the volcano and reef which featured plentiful hard corals.

After lunch, a few of us visited the nearby mangroves which were beautiful scenery as these shallow waters featured tiny fish with the volcano as their backdrop. Later that day, we dove the "**Baeatan Wall**" which can be considered a wide angle or macro site. I elected to use my macro lens one last time in search of the pygmy seahorse. Within minutes, our divemaster Erol found a red pygmy seahorse but it was so small that I couldn't get my macro lens to autofocus on the seahorse as it kept locking focus on the gorgonian instead. I did get a few shots but they weren't very good. I presume manual focus would have been better in this instance. We also saw banded pipefish, ornate ghost pipefish, hairy shrimp, skeleton shrimp, whip coral shrimp, and a diversity of fish life.



On day 10, we had finally reached the last full day of our journey and I was sad that this amazing adventure was about to end. We had made it back to Flores and were anchored at **Pulau Babi** island. We started the morning with a dive at "**Deep Divers**" which wasn't really a "deep" dive - we all stayed between 40-80 feet where most of the marine life was located. Here we performed two dives which both had excellent visibility, plentiful corals, swarming fish, and beautiful light.



As a final goodbye gift, I found two leaf scorpionfish at the end of my final dive during the last five minutes. One of the scorpionfish was yellow and perched upon a table coral. It was as if the impressive fish was giving me a proper send-off.



Thank you to Karl, our lively and accommodating cruise director, our captain Wahyu, who was always there to greet us after a dive and up through all hours of the night commanding our ship, Big John, for taking us to his wonderful village, Yaya, the chef for such delicious food, the entire crew, who always had smiles on their faces, and to the rest of our group, who I enjoyed meeting so much!

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