



## East of Flores 23rd August - 4 September 2015

*Trip Report by Dana Cook. Photos by Phil Burghard, Anders Osterballe & Terry Potter.*

I began to reminisce as soon as the Seven Seas came into view. Silent and starry nights steaming from one island to the next, muffled underwater shouts of excitement and the feeling of being transported back in a time where Buginese pirate ships still roamed the seas. I have been on the boat twice before, and I knew this trip wouldn't be the macro-maniac heaven of Raja Ampat, but I had no idea what wonders are held in and around the Flores Sea.

Above water we watched sea eagles effortlessly diving for food and thousands of flying foxes noiselessly emerging from their mangrove and into the evening sky. At the sea's surface we encountered blue and sperm whales, orcas and dolphins, and in its depths we met sharks, eagle rays and impressive schools of tuna. The Flores Sea is not only filled with dynamic wildlife, but its land is also alive.

Bleary-eyed one morning, I crept out of my cabin and onto the top deck to the sight of a booming mushroom cloud of ash erupting from a volcano adjacent to the boat. You not only see the presence of the volcanoes above water, but also hear the explosions vibrating through the reef. We even got the chance to feel its heat after a particularly cold dive. Shivering and shaking we surfaced, hopped into the speedboat and headed towards the local beach village of Beang Abang. Upon arrival we immediately dashed the hundred feet to the hot springs for an unbelievably warm bath, and were greeted by the village kids with a backflip and diving show.





Earlier in the day we witnessed a somewhat more impressive diving display of cetaceans. Ditching diving for a day, we headed out to open water with binoculars and squinting eyes in search of a spout or tail on the horizon. Strong, rich upwellings from the southern Indian Ocean mix with warmer Pacific waters to create feeding grounds for migrating cetaceans. We were lucky enough to come across three blue whales, a pod of sperms and a family of three orcas. Just before we left the newfound family, the massive female orca turned upside down and passed directly under our boat, showing us her big white belly. Humbled by the power and presence of these giants, we headed back to Beang Abang's black sand bay and waited until dark to find out what tiny critters come out at night. Searching in the black water, our torches illuminated elegant Spanish dancers, prehistoric-looking slipper lobsters and color-changing cuttlefish. The sharp-eyed guides even spotted a couple camouflaged ghost pipefish, which were so dedicated to their disguise that even a half dozen cameras and bubbling divers didn't make them flinch.







Even though most of the ship's guests have stayed on live-aboard boats and the Seven Seas before, it was a trip of firsts for many people. Spotted for a few moments, guests saw the mysterious mola mola coming up from the depths, a Great hammerhead cruising out in the blue, and vibrant mandarin fish hopping around their broken coral home. We were fortunate enough to visit the friendly Abui tribe in Kalabahi, who performed lively dances and song in beautifully woven ikat, and even shared some of their precious betel nut with the more daring guests.





Its comforting to know that even as the world around us is changes and develops, one can still board a Buginese schooner and explore seas full of rich coral, vibrant schools of fish and the people who still rely on them.

Dana Cook  
September 2015

