



## East of Flores, Impressions from an Exploratory Cruise, 25 Aug - 05 Sep 2013

*By Benjamin Kahn. Photos: Benjamin Kahn & Andreas Muljadi*

It's not often to get an invite to cruise a remote part of east Indonesia in total luxury. But that is exactly what happened to us! Better still it was ok to bring our 1.5 year old along, already a veteran of Komodo sailing. So that day in late July my wife and I looked at each other for a split second and said... Yes! And off we went to the airport for a local flight to Maumere. Below are just a couple of highlights from our adventure exploring the islands East of Flores.



### **Pelangi Pinnacle - A rainbow of colours and reef life**

On the way to investigate a new dive spot one day, we turned the corner at Rusa Island. Jos and Pi saw a broad pinnacle flashing under the speedboat so we stopped to check it out and decided to change our plans and dive this instead of the other site we had been aiming for. Exploring means being flexible and so we tumbled in. No current, great visibility and teeming fish life greeted us right away. We dived along 20m and circumnavigated the whole pinnacle, which was much larger than we expected.

A top site we named Pelangi Pinnacle (Pelangi meaning rainbow in Indonesia): excellent coral, drop-offs teeming with schooling fish including rainbow runners, striped barracudas, dog tooth tuna, long nosed emperors and 100's of large surgeon fish following us along. A colourful and vibrant reef spectacle not often seen anymore in East Indonesia, we ended up diving this site 3 times during the

trip, also exploring the deeper stepping stones. "Too big for just one dive" was the conclusion. Several great dives to be had here, great new find!



On one occasion along the top of the reef we found two mating octopuses. As we were settling in and filming the amorous pair connected by the male's "hectocolylus arm", the male was rudely and suddenly interrupted by an attacking moray eel dashing out its lair. The poor guy had to wrap his 8 arms around his head for cover! Amazing footage. After wrestling free from the eel, it didn't take him very long to re-connect with his romantic interest. This was all captured on video and gave a great insight into animal behavior on Pelangi Pinnacle.

### **Whale of a Day**

Another day we dedicated to "whale patrol", surveying our known cetacean hotspots off southern Pantar and Alor. To make the most of it we left anchor at 4am to be offshore on the edge of our survey area by daybreak. Then we set the track SE-E-NE-N as a hexagon with 8nm sides towards our planned dive at noon. This way we planned to cover areas between the 2000m and 3000m depth contours and through a local upwelling zone. Well, we never made it to the planned dive at Treweg Island...

At 8:30, after just two hours of us scanning the horizon Yvonne yelled "BLOWWW!!! ONE O'CLOCK!!! It's a sperm whale". That's an impressive search time, as we routinely spend 8 hours on average searching for sperm whales (even that is exceptional when compared to other areas worldwide). We set course for the blow and soon 8 sperm whales were sighted, spread out over a mile or so around the Seven Seas. The whales were all heading in the same direction and are positioned along an imaginary line. We found a typical sperm whale family unit of about 8-12 animals, sweeping through the area while making coordinated feeding dives.



As sperm whales in the tropics routinely dive to 800-1200m depth for 40-45 min with a surface interval of 8-10 minutes between dives, there is not much time to get the boat positioned close to a pod of whales. Especially as our boat handling with the sensitive sperm whales means we have to tip-toe in from about half a mile onwards. So it's hit and miss but after an hour these efforts pay off as the whales get used to the boat's behavior around them and then start to ignore it altogether. That's our goal - to see whales in their natural habitat doing natural behaviours (and not whales being busy with avoiding boats). This takes some time and that's why we decided to ditch the dive plan altogether and spend the whole day with these whales - and see what else we could find in this special area. Back in 2005 we witnessed how 4 orcas attacked a sperm whale calf and 2 adults not far from here. Only a handful of researchers have ever reported on such attacks... Well we didn't find Orca's but ran into a Blue Whale instead...

### **Timor Tom - a legendary bull sperm whale**

On another one of our whale watching days, we grabbed our snorkeling gear and sped off in the rubber dingy towards a large male sperm whale resting and spouting not so far away. In order not to disturb him we made a wide circle around him and dropped in well ahead of his constant swimming direction. That's what I call the "frontal drop" and when done with care it gives very close viewing as the whale approaches the swimmers pretending to be flotsam! And it all worked perfectly. There are not many people who have been jaw-to-jaw with a 16m bull sperm whale but that is exactly what happened.





We positioned ourselves so well we actually had to swim out of the way of its massive white nose appearing out of the blue, all scarred up from battles with deep-sea squid and fellow sperm whales (the video clearly shows the parallel 'rake marks' on its head, indicative of male-male fighting). Then after we looked on in awe on meter after meter of massive muscle, the huge fluke came into view slowly moving up and down. Once the whale was just past us we felt the wash out and power of the water movement and quickly gave up our attempt to follow. Then it dived into the dark ocean depths, an environment largely alien to us, where the sperm whale spends most of its life. We were all stunned...What an amazing encounter with the largest toothed predator on the planet.

Sexually and socially mature sperm whales can grow to 18m in length and be 45 tonnes in weight. Whereas the females "only" reach 11m and 15 tonnes and look so much smaller. We sighted this huge male several times more and once positioned the boat slowly yet so close he was along side about 20 m away for a massive fluke-up. We named this well-behaved giant "Timor Tom", after a rogue bull sperm whale which harassed the 19th Century Yankee whaling fleet in this area, Moby Dick style.

### **Toro Tuna!**

So how do you catch a 200 pound yellow-fin tuna with your BARE HANDS? Yes, that's a 100 kilos fishy fighting muscle and one of the fastest predators in the tropical ocean. Here's what you need to catch one of these giants and store it away - Savu Sea Style:

- A small boat with 25hp outboard
- 300 meters of fishing line - leave the rod and reel at home
- Natural bait (small frigate mackerel) rigged with a feather lure in front
- A kite
- Plastic bags for fish fillets
- Ice in the wooden hull
- A group of about a 1000 spotted dolphins all around the boat
- A helper who gives you the gaff at the moment supreme

- A hoodie...for that sun-block ocean gangsta look
- Cool sunglasses
- And most important if you want to use your hands again that month, two white gloves, 100% wool!

Finally you would do well with ... A lifetime of hand-lining big tunas at sea. To cue in on all the local signs and the skills to position your boat, kite and bait in just the right spot, at the right depth and the right time.

Basically this fishery is so specialized it is mostly done by the villagers of Atapupu, on the Timor coast. Jos just completed an interview-based study on "fisheries supply lines" of the NTT province that neatly identified this village and their fishing grounds and markets. Case study confirmed in the field, and these guys were fishing just off the south coast of Alor, busy at work at 3pm with still about 60 km of open seas to cross in order to get home that day!



As Jos and I jumped on the speedboat boat to check out the faraway splashes near some local boats, we did not expect to become one of the very few outsiders who would see a local and sustainable tuna fishery in action, from that close. But soon we were in amongst it all to get in on some of the action, trolling our own lures in a coordinated zig-zag pattern with the locals. There were dolphins everywhere, spotted dolphins with some spinners mixed in as well. I have seen many large groups of oceanic cetaceans before, but here we encountered a super aggregation of spotted dolphins, after two hours of heading in each and every way with endless dolphins around us, I estimated this aggregation over a 1000 animals. The dolphins and tuna interact in ways that are still poorly understood. What is important to know is how to position the lure in front of the moving group! Easier said than done, especially when you are kite fishing as some of the boats were doing. We kept a close eye on their long lines and drop lures, some bouncing around near us. All this whilst the

dolphins were churning the water, seabirds overhead and the occasional yellow-fin barreling along the surface nearby. "This is my kind of fishing!!" I shouted at Jos with a big grin on my face. What an amazing spectacle of the ocean in action.



Suddenly the water exploded as a big yellow-fin rocketed straight out of the water like a Polaris missile, still chasing a cloud of bait fish in mid-air as well! Surely we were going to have double strikes again soon (we got some good fish earlier)... But luckily for my arms we did not catch any big yellow-fin tuna that day. The locals shouted to us from their passing boats that the action was good that morning, while we were busy swimming with the sperm whales and tracking the blue whale. Ah well...life is all about priorities :)

This Savu Sea tuna fishery is regarded by experts as sustainable mainly because the fish targeted and caught are large adults that have already spawned many times; the skill-based technique means it is hard to enter this fishery as a novice; the hand-line method also mean there is zero by-catch of unwanted or vulnerable species. This is a big plus in a marine corridor habitat where net entanglements could be a major threat for blue and sperm whales, as well as many turtles and other large marine life passing through.

Benjamin Kahn  
September 2013





## Other reports from this cruise

### Karl Klingeler, Seven Seas Cruise Director:

On this East of Flores trip we decided to do some real exploring to further enrich our potential itineraries. We found some incredible new dives, on one of which we saw well over a dozen sharks, both white tips and black tips. Sometimes we don't see that many sharks during an entire trip, let alone on a twenty minute survey dive. We spent good time in the Savu Sea and discovered some very colorful reefs on Lembata. Rocks just breaking the surface, or "Batu Mandi", as they call them in Indonesian, covered in soft corals, tunicates, cup corals and bright yellow sea cucumbers.

We also further explored a dive discovered by Mark Heighes in the South. We zig-zagged through bommies covered in soft corals and entered a big hole, where we found a sleeping nurse shark. As we came out from under the overhang, into a huge swim through, we were met by an enormous school of midnight snapper, followed by a school of giant trevally and then pickhandle barracuda. As we looked back, we could see the arch of the swim through. We finished on a beautiful negative wall.



We also explored a rocky islet that had not been dived before, and which was equally rich with life above water as it was below water. Topside was a colony of terns and a pair of white-bellied sea eagles. Underwater we saw schools of surgeonfish, unicornfish, sweetlips, red snappers, barracuda

and a half dozen dog-tooth tuna, one of which was massive and came in to check us out. We also saw turtles and sharks here, in front of what was clearly a turtle nesting beach.

One of the most exciting things on this trip for me was snorkeling with sperm whales. We had three separate encounters with mature male sperm whales, which are called bulls, and they were huge. With Ben's help, we were dropped in the perfect spot for the first sighting - out of the blue came a huge, scarred-up head of a sperm whale. He didn't care much, he just looked at us as he swam by, one meter away - Wow!, what an amazing experience. On the second encounter, Linda and I were again positioned perfectly in the water, watching the approaching whale, when he unexpectedly dived down in front of us. We looked down to see him below us, on his side with his mouth open. The third encounter with a bull was late afternoon, the water was green and murky, the whale was huge - we could see him above the water but not underwater, although he was so close. He was emitting a loud metallic pinging noise and all of a sudden, there he was. It was a bit scary but what an adrenalin rush!

We also managed to get in the water with a pair of female sperm whales and watch them dive down - what an amazing sight. That day was truly the experience of a lifetime that I will never forget. A big thanks to Ben Kahn for helping us make it happen and teaching us so much.



#### **Mirza Pedju - The Nature Conservancy:**

This exploration trip with the Seven Seas in the eastern part of the lesser sunda marine ecoregion was indeed incredible. We found a beautiful sand spit near Adunara surrounded by water filled with blue spotted stingrays. Not far from it, there were mangroves with their thousands of fruitbats. The dive sites around Lembata and Pantar were also amazing, cold and strong water current. One dive site was simply amazing. We went through this cave where there was a nurse shark taking a nap surrounded by schools of snappers, barracudas, and surgeon fishes. I felt as if I were in rest station on a highway with all kinds of cars stopping by for a quick bite! The highlight of the trip, however, was the whale sightings south of Alor on my last day with Seven Seas. We are lucky to have Benjamin and Yvonne Kahn, both are cetacean experts who are familiar with this area. These sperm whales were so close to Seven Seas. Everyone, including the crews, took still and video shots of these wonderful marine mammals. I even got a couple of chances to swim close to them. The organization I worked for, The Nature Conservancy, is committed to support the sustainable development of Lesser Sunda marine ecoregion. In this huge area, we know we had to work with various key sectors, including the tourism sector. It was comforting to have committed and passionate Seven Seas team out there to promote sustainable tourism in this beautiful part of Lesser Sunda.





**Andreas Muljadi, The Coral Triangle Center:**

It was a special trip on The Seven seas that I joined as a representative of The Coral Triangle Center. The first day we arrived in north of Adonara and on dive 3 and 4 at north of Ipet island, we counted about 20 blacktip reef sharks and 3 whitetip reef sharks, together with schooling snappers, sweetlips and groupers which are important target fish for commercial fisheries, showing that this area still has a healthy food chain and ecosystem. Day 2 we made 2 exploration dives at north of Lewoleba bay and a bay on southwest of Lembata island. The dive 5 was more critter dive type where we found some colorful nudibranch, nice wrasses, shrimps and other critters. The dive 6 was a beautiful dive. We found big school of reef snappers, sweetlips, and some trevallies and other marine life such as yellow sea cucumber and nice gorgonian. Day 3 on west of Pantar island we made 3 great dives at south of Kambing island, Mekah and the Rock near Marisa island. On the 3 dives we found great underwater scenery and good numbers of fish such as barracuda, giant trevally, unicorn fish and good critters as well. Day 4 is cetacean day trip. We got great sighting of 4 different species which are spinner dolphin, sperm whale, pilot whale and melon-headed whale. We started at 6 in the morning and finished at 5 pm. Never got tired of it!

