



The Forgotten Islands Part 2, November 2016

Trip Report and photos by David George.

On November 24 the MV Seven Seas embarked on the second leg of the 2016 Forgotten Islands adventure, from Saumlaki in South-East Maluku province, to Sorong in West Papua. This 16-night voyage, covering around 700 nautical miles, would take us through the Banda Sea and the remote volcanic islands of the Inner Archipelago, to the Spice Islands of Banda and into the Seram Sea and Raja Ampat.

My third time on the boat (with fourth and fifth already booked!), this trip brought together old and new friends from across the world, from Australia, USA, UK and Europe. This was a long anticipated opportunity to experience some of the most remote and isolated areas of the Indonesian Archipelago, and there is really only one way to do it - on board the magnificent Seven Seas.

This would be a long and remote journey, joining the dots of tiny isolated islands and reefs. Not until we reach Raja Ampat in the final days would we see another dive boat. We occasionally share the waters with local villagers in their wooden fishing boats, and spot island ferries in the distance, but this is remote territory, and it often feels like we are the only people on earth. It is such a privilege to be here, comfortable in the safe hands of Captains Wayhu and Pai.

The first glimpses of the boat anchored in Saumlaki harbour brings a lump to the throat to those that have travelled on her before. She is such a graceful vessel, but it is also the anticipation of being reunited with our extended family for the next 16 days – the incredible Seven Seas crew. Welcome drink and hugs and handshakes completed, everyone on board was eager to unpack their dive gear and get ready to bubble away the worries of the world with an easy check-out dive that afternoon.

After a dinner under the stars it was time for a gentle overnight cruise east to Dawera Island. In the morning we are all up early and eager to get in the water but Big John has the most important job of the day to do before we can begin; its time for his early morning Welcome Drink in the local village as he secures permission for us to dive in their waters. This ritual will be repeated many times on our trip, an important connection with the local people of this area, but Big John can handle the palm wine better than most...



The sun is shining, the sea calm, breakfast orders taken, and we plunge into the clear warm waters of the Banda Sea. I have dived in many parts of the world, but I have never seen such blue water; it really is “Banda Blue”. It’s a beautiful wall dive with enormous fans and soft corals, with clouds of colourful anthias dancing along the reef top. Schooling chevron barracuda entice us into the blue to join their swirling, and there were even reports of a hammerhead in the deep. What a way to start the day. We decide to dive this site again and again over the next couple of days as there is so much to see, and each time it’s a different dive.

As a photographer I often struggle with the perennial decision of “wide or macro”, but there was no question here. I love my macro-photography, and there are plenty of critters around, but the water is so blue and alive, and the light so good that it is difficult to turn your focus away from the reef landscape and to the macro communities. So I choose wide-angle, and end up staying with this for almost the entire trip, but feel that every single dive could be redone with a different perspective.



That evening I do something unusual (for me), a dive without a camera; but this was no ordinary dive, we were there to see the flashlight fish, and with lights off we gently drifted past overhangs as the sparkles and trails of these secretive fish mesmerized us, finally surfacing through the bioluminescence to a calm starry moonless night above.

The following day we see pygmy seahorses at the recently named *Marianne’s Garden* (after being dived for the first time the previous week on Marianne’s birthday). One aspect of a trip like this is that there are so many dive sites to discover, and it is quite possible that some of them have never been dived before.

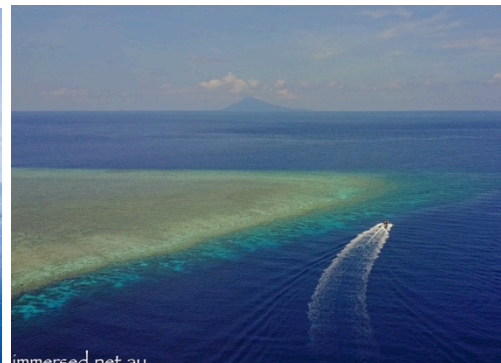
The next few days are filled with exceptional diving around the limestone islands of the southern Banda Sea, island hopping by night across calm seas, after dinner under the stars. Barracuda are present on every dive, from huge schools to lonely patrols, a highlight dive site being *To Dai For* at the tiny Dai Island. Some of us visit the village, where the friendly locals are happy for us to wander the streets. The visit gives us a sense of the remoteness and unique cultural identity of the Forgotten Islands, with imported Christian themes coupled with traditional symbolism and beliefs. While we are being cultured, Owen heads offshore with his fishing buddies Big John and Imam and returns with a couple of good-sized wahoo; sashimi for pre-dinner snacks that evening, yum!

The next day we are at Palau's Semata and Kelapa, where we have schools of snapper, big-eye jacks, golden batfish, and "rivers of fish" in the shallows as schools of juvenile fusiliers and sardines make highways along the reef. I have to name one of the sites "snow globe" due to the clouds of fish across the reeftop.



Master Chef Totok's cooking is a highlight of this trip, with exceptional multi-course lunches and dinners and this evening he brings us a tasty version of fusion food, with "rib-eye satays" on the menu as we gently float on a mirror-like ocean, before an overnight cruise so calm that it defies the senses – it feels like we are barely moving.

After a day at Palau Terbang Selatan, where we dive the well-named *Sonia's Favourite* (twice 😊) we cruise to the volcanic inner archipelago, where the scenery changes from clusters of limestone islands to dramatic isolated volcanic peaks. Woken in the morning by a strong sulphurous odour we find ourselves at the very foot of an active, gently smoking volcano, Teun. Over the next couple of days I head for the skies with my drone to capture the spectacular scenery.



Another incredibly calm night of travelling and we arrive at Kerang Nildesperandum. You won't find it on many maps, this reef barely breaks the ocean's surface, but is an incredible location in the middle of the deep Banda Sea, with the ocean dropping to many thousands of metres all around.

Onwards to Serua where we do some exploring, discovering sites with huge schools of jacks and the biggest giant clam that anyone has ever seen. This is some of the deepest diving that we do, with dives heading towards 30m, with the reward of spotting the occasional hammerhead in the deep. But this place is also about colourful soft coral on the walls and overhangs, and stunning hard coral gardens on the reeftop. This is truly pristine.

Another day and another volcano, but this one is different, a very active and ominous Manuk Island, with sulphurous smoke swirling around the peak and scorched vegetation on the slopes. An uninhabited island, this is the land of seabirds and sea snakes. Diving on the underwater slopes of the volcano the landscape is very different, with enormous barrel sponges and orange soft coral. The word of the day though is not volcano, it is seasnake! The snakes are not just the usual black and white bands, but also a beautiful green species, which go about their business completely oblivious to us divers.

We leave the volcano behind after 3 dives, and another glassy (and wine-glassy ;-)) sunset cruise towards the Spice Islands of Banda. The Australian's among us felt very much at home with some of our favourite Margaret River wines on the latest wine list.



The diving feels different in the Banda Islands, deep swimthroughs, slightly cooler water (some of us even wore wetsuits!) and some strong currents, but such stunning diving. Clouds of pyramid butterflyfish at the submerged pinnacles of *Batu Kapal* (Karl's favourite) and more decorated dartfish at Hatta Island than I have seen in a lifetime. My highlight in Banda was a dusk-dive with the Mandarin fish. Those "less brave" than I observed from the bar of the Hotel in Banda Neira, just metres from

where I plunged to the depths (3 metres...) to spend time with the most beautiful fish in the ocean.



The next day we woke to rain and wind, but it didn't stop us, revisiting the swimthrough at *Turbang Burang* for an atmospheric dive. This was also a very special day for Karl, his birthday! We celebrated it after the first dive with the traditional Indonesian "flour and eggs" (plus kecup manis hairwash!), and a fabulous birthday cake in the evening. Dive 2 was on the lava flow at the base of *Gunung Api*; an amazing landscape of ridges and valleys, completely covered with stunning hard coral and the occasional sponge and bommie. It was all too much for the Seven Seas Hydrobatic team, who (after completing their safety stop...) felt the need to practice their (un)synchronized somersaults in the safety of the blue while we drifted away from the reef for a boat pick-up.

The weather cleared in the afternoon and we made a must-do land tour of Banda Neira, where we had a great walk around this fascinating and historical town. The friendliness of the people belied the dark and bloody history of this famous Spice Island, where colonial powers battled for control of the valuable spice, nutmeg.

Leaving Banda in the evening, the next day we arrived at the Marine Protected Area of Koon, where three little words summed it up – *Too Many Fish*. We dived this site 3 times in succession it was so good. Goliath Grouper joined the schools of snapper and big-eye jacks on a sloping reef with a deep drop off below 30 metres. Another birthday was celebrated, this time the wonderful Sonia, the one who has brought many of us together to become lifelong friends.



Birthday celebrations continued into the evening, with bubbles of a different kind, as we raised the jib sails to aid a smooth overnight cruise to the famous Misool.

The last two days we spend at Misool, Raja Ampat , amongst the famous colourful soft corals and mushroom rocks, but one word summed up our visit there – MANTA! *Karang Bayangan* was calm on the surface but so active underneath, and the oceanic mantas were visiting the cleaning stations. We had some unforgettable dives with them, undoubtedly the most extraordinary underwater experience that most of us have had. The mantas were calm and inquisitive. Some of us were privileged to spend much of one dive in the company of the most beautiful creature – an enormous white Oceanic manta that danced with us as it was gently attended to by the swarms of cleaner fish. For some of us it was our first taste of the Raja Ampat area, and left us wanting more, which is why we have already booked our trip to return in 2018!



The Seven Seas crew is without question the best liveaboard crew in all of Indonesia, if not the world. Their experience and knowledge is unparalleled, their care is genuine and their camaraderie is strong and infectious. I can't wait to spend another trip with my Seven Seas family.

