



The Journey East, October 2016

Trip Report by Wai-Ling Wong. Photos by Stuart Beckingham & Wai-Ling Wong.

After two and a half years working and diving in the lush and diverse waters of Komodo, the opportunity to explore waters further East has been high on the bucket list; and what better way to discover the area than to sail through with the Seven Seas.

The allure of the East of Flores trip is that it feels truly off the beaten track; for much of the time our magnificent vessel is the only boat around, apart from the few local fishing boats. The Seven Seas navigated through the rich waters and spectacular landscapes from Flores to Alor unaccompanied, under calm conditions and starry nights. It was a voyage that evoked the times when the Bugis pirates traversed these waters, a time of discovery and wonder.



The trip began with a personal jackpot win on the wreck at Wodong, a couple of hours from our

departure port Maumere. I finally encountered the mimic octopus, a species that has managed to evade my presence time and time again, well not this time! This time I got to experience its hypnotic dance.



This was to be the first of many encounters with rare and intriguing cephalopods. We back rolled close to shore in front of a small settlement, all of us full to the brim with excitement and anticipation for what little treasures were waiting for us on the black sands of Beang Abang. It immediately seemed like all the octopuses in the vicinity wanted to say hello, with mototi, wunderpus, coconut and longarm species flaunting themselves in front of eager eyes. Other cryptic critters such as delicate ghost pipefishes, pygmy pipehorse, decorator crabs, snake eels, seahorses, sea moths, shrimps, nudibranchs, ambon scorpionfish and hairy frogfishes helped to fulfil our hunger for the small stuff.

The carefully thought out itinerary allowed time for a fascinating shore visit to meet the friendly inhabitants of Beang Abang. The children were keen to practice their English and pose for photos, showing us around their quaint village where we are welcomed with the warmest of smiles. There were also opportunities to paddle out on a kayak in the calm, clear waters; to sit in the silence of nature and soak in the wilderness. Being the lone adventurer on a remote sandbar induces a childlike sense of intrigue, adventure, and freedom. Sentiments seldom aroused in today's world of modern distractions.

It is fair to say that the rich waters to the south of Lembata around Rusa were a highlight of the trip for all. It's a great testament to the quality of the diving here when divers that have been diving all around the world for over thirty years surfaced from Rainbow Ridge, excitedly exclaiming that was their best dive ever. The constant flow of current at Watu Balu has cultivated an immaculate reef, the unique underwater topography is stacked with perfect corals that are swarming with fish life all bundled together by the punchy currents, forming the perfect spot for our insatiable appetites.



You know it's good when everybody barely out of the water requests the same dive not twice but three, actually four times if you include the night dive. The ethereal forest of Alcatraz is a true underwater spectacle - a dense forest of hundreds of soft coral trees some over a meter sprouting from the volcanic black sand. That was before we hit the huge black coral bushes, spectacular wall and bommies that are teeming with life and colour. Definitely one to put at the top of the list. Just wow!

Diving these remote coral reefs I soon start to notice behaviour I am not used to from the inhabitants - the behaviour of fish is a little different, perhaps they are not accustomed to divers, almost as if they are confused. It seems like they don't know how to react when they see us - "shall I swim away, shall I hide?" The sudden panic and dash is perhaps a startled reaction to seeing divers for the first time. An indication that visitors to these pristine habitats is very much a rare occurrence?

Mark planned three days between Lembata and Alor around the islands of Pura, Reta, and Ternate. Topside we are welcomed by the local children as they paddle out in small wooden canoes with a "Hello Mister" giggles and laughter shelter their initial shyness but soon these water babies are showing off their free diving skills and posing for underwater photos with their homemade goggles.





The diving continued to delight with clear and warm water and a diverse range of sites including spectacular walls, muck, and a unique site where almost every single inch is carpeted with anemones - like a child's imaginary reef turned into a reality.

Of course, no trip to Alor would be complete without a sighting of rhinopias. After fifty-seven minutes of scouring a site on Pura Island, I heard frantic banging and looked up to see an ecstatic Irwan with a stunning weedy scorpionfish sat in less than 4m of water, just as we were admiring the beauty and intricacy of the stunning specimen, I spot a bouncing movement out the corner of my eye, both Irwan and I bang our tanks and look at each other with muffled excitement, a second rhinopia! Just for good measure we found another two at the Mucky Mosque and a striking scarlet paddleflap variety on a night dive.

Nature provided the perfect encounter to mark the turning point of our trip, we sailed away from Alor accompanied by a very co-operative mega pod of dolphins as the sun sets and we steam westwards.

Our overnight journey is temporarily held up by sulphuric cloud, our next stop is Komba. Diving on the side of an active volcano, you are treated to breath taking scenery, lush and green on one side and you turn the corner and faced with the spectacular caldera and smokey mouth of the volcano. Not a bad backdrop for the Seven Seas, underwater the landscape is equally impressive. A Wonderland!



Whilst watching the vivid sunsets, and enjoying the culinary masterpieces of Chef Totok, we are presented with intrepid recollections of nautical adventure and discovery from Seven Seas co-founder and cruise director Mark. A true sea farer and master of these waters, his tales of the high seas have us all on the edge of our seats and wanting more.

Our journey concluded with a cultural excursion to the local village of Watublapi where we are welcomed to a performance of music and dance depicting the traditional way of life and shown the different steps of ikat weaving. We were all invited to try the local betel nut chew, believed to have a stimulative effect that also stains the mouth bright red. Stu and I also took part in the performance and dressed in the colourful and intricately weaved ikats, I think our immense dancing skills entertained some local bystanders.

Sadly, the trip had to come to an end after twelve magnificent nights, thirty-six splendid dives and countless special memories. Thank you again Mark and the wonderful crew who worked hard to ensure every single guest left with an unforgettable experience on board the Seven Seas.

Wai-Ling Wong

Seven Seas, October 2016



