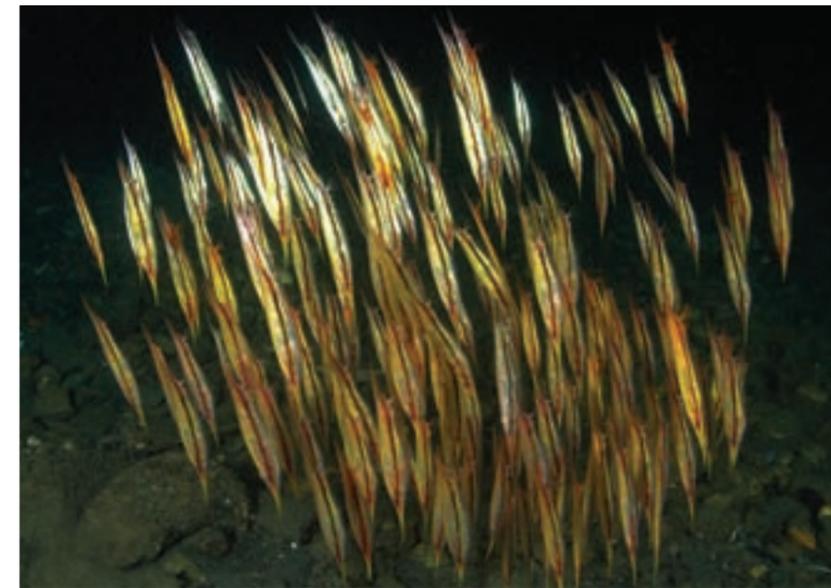




TWILIGHT ZONE

Muck-diving was never muckier than in Ambon Harbour's underwater junkyard, but the debris is studded with living jewels, says DON SILCOCK



WRITER FILE:

NAME ▶ Don Silcock

FROM ▶ Runcorn, Cheshire but based in Australia since 1991

AGE ▶ 55

DIVED-IN ▶ Since 1978

QUALIFICATIONS ▶ BSAC Advanced Instructor (retd), PADI Divemaster

DAYJOB ▶ Asia Major Project Sales Manager, General Electric - Optimisation & Control

KIT I WOULDN'T BE WITHOUT ▶ A camera

TOP DIVE SITE ▶ Cape Kri, Irian Jaya, Indonesia

WHICH CAMERA ▶ Nikon D200 & Subal housing

HAVE ABSOLUTELY NO IDEA who came up with the idea of naming a dive site the Twilight Zone, but it was a flash of inspiration, and I can think of no better way to describe the feeling you have when you're there.

I first read about it in Becca Saunders' book about Ambon in the north-east of the Indonesian archipelago, written in 1998 following an extended stay on the island.

Becca described the place as "100 metres of sloping sandy shoreline with a jewel-encrusted jetty as the epicentre and populated with exotic, rare and downright weird marine creatures".

It sounded like my kind of place, but I didn't get a chance to dive there until September 2006, when we entered Ambon's harbour aboard the *Ondina*, a *pinisi*-style schooner built and run by Spanish adventurer Ricard Buxo.

We had boarded *Ondina* a week earlier in Maumere, Flores and then

dived various locations in the Lesser Sunda Islands before heading north-east to the Banda Sea and the fabled Banda Islands.

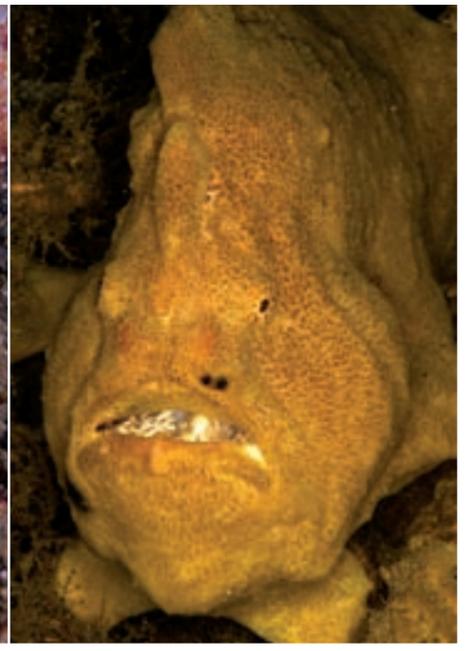
The plan had been to sail overnight from Alor to the Gunung Api volcano, which rises from the 4000m depths of the Banda Sea and provides the only shelter on route to the Banda Islands.

Gunung Api actually means "Fire Mountain", but a more appropriate title would be Snake Island, because that's why divers go there.

The island is inundated with sea snakes and provides a unique experience, but during the two days we spent there the weather was quietly deteriorating, and Ricard warned us that we were in for a rough journey to the Bandas.

And it did turn out to be harrowing, the sort of voyage where you lie in your bunk mentally preparing yourself for abandoning ship, and working out

Clockwise from above: Batfish and silversides under the jetty; school of razorfish at dusk; striped catfish forages in the volcanic sand; frogfish; a crab peers from its burrow.





which items you should take with you!

The Banda Sea is a very exposed area, and when bad weather hits the choices available are limited. After a night spent pounding into the heavy seas, it became obvious that we were not going to make it to the Banda Islands, and would have to head north to the island of Ambon.

IT TOOK ANOTHER DAY and a half before we entered the huge bay that

separates the northern and southern parts of Ambon, and forms the superb natural harbour. The human spirit being what it is and divers being what they are, once safe again everybody's natural enthusiasm for the ocean returned, and thoughts were back on diving.

There are several locations in the bay, but we went for the Twilight Zone. We dived it repeatedly over the next few days and were amazed by the diversity of



Clockwise from left: Mandarinfish; leaf scorpionfish; orange-banded pipefish; silversides stream around the jetty at noon; Rhinopias at 32m.

marine life. Becca was right!

I went back to the Banda Sea last April, but this time starting from Ambon. I went back on the same boat, as I figured that we had already weathered some of the worst the Banda Sea could throw at us. Why risk another boat, when *Ondina* had proven itself?

Our first dive and the last three dives of the trip were at the Twilight Zone. I stayed in Ambon with Maluku Divers and dived the area again, but this time with one of its guides. He showed me many things I had missed completely on my previous dives.

Bob Halstead, the godfather of muck-diving, once defined it as diving that takes place at any site that does not have beautiful underwater scenery. Well, the Twilight Zone is not a pretty site under water, and certainly meets Bob's criteria.

For an underwater photographer, muck-diving typically means a site that contains lots of unusual and photogenic critters – and I have never seen such a diversity of critters in one relatively small location as gather in the Twilight Zone.

The site is located near the village of Laha, roughly halfway up the northern shore of the bay. Close to the airport, the main jetty that is the epicentre of the Twilight Zone is formally known as the Aviation Jetty, because this is where the aviation fuel for the airport is brought in by tanker and unloaded.

When not hosting fuel tankers, the jetty is home to a small fleet of fishing boats that ply the rich waters around Ambon and ship their catch to Bali.

It is the organic and inorganic waste from the fishing boats, together with the

freshwater run-off from the river that empties into the bay nearby, the sheltered nature of the site and the currents and coldwater upwellings that combine to create the conditions that nourish this incredible ecosystem.

The inorganic waste in the underwater junkyard created by the fishing boats consists of everything from car tyres to filing-cabinet drawers discarded over the years.

The bulk of the organic waste comes from the fish carcasses thrown over the side after the fish have been cleaned and filleted for shipment to Bali.

When this happens, the bottom-feeding inhabitants of the Zone emerge. The first time I was in the water during one of these feeding frenzies, I was about 15m away from the action. I was blissfully unaware of what was going



on until the visibility suddenly decreased.

On investigation I found a huge swarm of catfish devouring the remaining flesh on the carcasses. Their action was so intense that they threw up the surrounding black volcanic sand in a mini underwater sandstorm that drifted down into the depths.

Darting in and out of the catfish swarm were moray eels, risking a daylight foray to make sure they got their share of this sudden bounty!

There are dozens of moray eels in the junkyard beneath the fishing boats. Every opening seems to be occupied by at least one, but often two or three will be co-habiting.

Morays are typically nocturnal, and on one late afternoon dive I settled in front of the main junkyard area and waited patiently to see what happened.

Over about 15 minutes one head after another popped out of the junk, until in the fading light I was able to count more than 20 eels contemplating their night-time activities. It was quite a sight!

Five or six fishing boats usually tie up side by side at the Aviation Jetty, creating a canopy over the main area



Above: A very vibrant nudibranch.

Above right: A pipefish poses for his photograph.

and inducing the feeling of continuous twilight you experience when diving there during the day.

Most of the boats are running their generators, and the constant rumble of diesel engines above you adds to the overall eeriness of the site!

BENEATH THE JETTY, a large shoal of silversides seems to migrate its way continuously between the columns, and then out beneath the fishing boats in a brilliant flowing stream.

Diving the jetty around noon on a sunny day means that it's time to swap the macro lens for wide-angle, and we are talking fish-eye wide.

The overhead sun's rays penetrate the gaps between boats and jetty, creating intense columns of light and dappled patterns on the volcanic sand.

The silversides seem to become particularly active at this time, and it really is a sight to behold as you sit in the shadows, the diesel engines throbbing above your head, as they stream through the columns and out beneath the fishing boats and back.

At night the site transforms again as the fish and critters active during the daytime settle down in their hiding holes and the nocturnal predators emerge.

Extra care needs to be taken at night, as there are so many stinging and poisonous things to kneel on, such as stonefish, a profusion of scorpionfish, including lots of the Ambon variety, many urchins around the junkyard area and, of course, foraging morays.

A second pier on the small headland that sticks out into the bay affords protection to the Twilight Zone and is also well worth investigating, though the absence of the junkyard and its closer proximity to the strong currents of the bay seem to make it a less "target-rich" environment than the Aviation Pier.

Around the headland is the site called Laha 2, and the sloping sands here are well worth investigating, although care needs to be taken with the fairly strong

currents in this area. Richard Buxo told me that he had seen two of the much sought-after *Rhinopias* in the shallow seagrass area here.

When I first dived it I found much interesting stuff, but no *Rhinopias*.

However when I subsequently returned with Maluku Divers my guide took me down to 32m and introduced me to a beautiful purple *Rhinopias* and, shortly after, a stunning red one at 28m!

Heading slightly further west there is a third jetty. I didn't dive here, although the one dive I did in the Laha 3 area of which it is part was very enjoyable. But Twilight Zone remains my favourite muck-dive site in Ambon. ▶

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ Fly from London to Jakarta or Bali via Singapore with Singapore Airlines. Local flights to Ambon are available from Bali, Jakarta, Manado and Makassar. Singapore is also served from London by BA and Emirates.

DIVING ▶ Maluku Divers, www.divingmaluku.com.

WHEN TO GO ▶ Year-round, but especially May-December. Water temperature 24-28°C.

MONEY ▶ Rupiah. Credit cards are often not accepted.

HEALTH ▶ Malaria protection will be needed and do not drink the tap water.

PRICES ▶ Maluku Divers' budget accommodation starts from US \$25 per night, or it offers a "dive & stay" package from \$200 a night in air-conditioned en-suite accommodation. Two dives daily costs \$85. Flights start from around £900.

TOURIST INFORMATION ▶ www.indonesia-tourism.com



QUEEN OF THE EAST

AMBON ISLAND IS THE CAPITAL of Maluku Province of Eastern Indonesia. Its main town Kota Ambon is the largest and most developed in the area. In the 17th century, with both the spice trade and the Dutch monopoly on cloves at their peak, Ambon, the "Queen of the East", was the Netherlands' eastern base.

Kota Ambon was devastated by aerial bombardment during WW2, and the buildings that have replaced the destroyed Dutch colonial ones lack their charm.

However, the beautiful natural harbour differentiates it from other Indonesian towns, and the backdrop of heavily forested mountains creates a pleasant vista, particularly in early morning or late afternoon.

The Ambonese are predominantly Christian but there is a significant Muslim population. Long a model of peaceful co-existence, tensions between the two communities related to the severe economic and political problems of Indonesia in the late 1990s erupted into severe violence in '99. The area became a tourism no-go zone, and it was only in 2002 that tempers cooled and the area started to return to normal.

Today, signs remain of how bad the "troubles" were in the shape of burnt-out buildings but the economy is growing strongly thanks to the influx of reconstruction funds.