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I'VE NO IDEA WHO NAMED THIS DIVE SITE, BUT IT WAS PURE INSPIRATION – THERE'S NO BETTER WAY TO DESCRIBE THE FEELING WHEN YOU'RE THERE. I FIRST READ OF IT IN BECCA SAUNDER'S BOOK ON AMBON, WRITTEN IN 1998 AFTER AN EXTENDED STAY ON THE ISLAND. BECCA DESCRIBED IT AS "ONE HUNDRED METRES OF SLOPING SANDY SHORELINE WITH A JEWEL-ENCRUSTED JETTY AS THE EPICENTRE AND POPULATED WITH EXOTIC, RARE AND DOWNRIGHT WEIRD MARINE CREATURES". EVEN THEN IT SOUNDED LIKE MY KIND OF PLACE...

I didn't dive there until September 2006. We'd boarded *Ondina* a week earlier in Maumere in Flores and visited locations in the Lesser Sundas before heading northeast to the Banda Sea and the fabled Banda Islands. It was planned to sail overnight from Alor to the Gunung Api volcano, which rises from the 4000 metre depths of the Banda Sea and provides the only shelter on route. (Gunung Api means 'fire mountain' but a more appropriate title would be Snake Island, because the place is inundated with sea snakes!) But during the two days there the weather deteriorated and skipper Ricard Buxo warned us we were in for a rough trip to the Bandas. The Banda Sea is very exposed and when bad weather hits available choices are pretty limited. The journey **was** harrowing, the sort where you lie in your bunk mentally preparing to abandon ship and working out what items you should take with you. After a night of pounding into heavy seas it was obvious we wouldn't make the Banda Islands and it would be Ambon instead.

A day and a half later we entered the huge bay separating north and south Ambon, a 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 turned to diving again. There are several locations in the bay but we chose the Twilight Zone and dived it repeatedly over the next few days. We were amazed by the diverse marine life – Becca Saunders was right!

I went back to the Banda Sea in April 2007, but started from Ambon this time. I also chose the same boat as I figured we'd weathered some of the worst the Banda Sea could throw at us – so why risk another boat when *Ondina* was already proven?

Our first and last three dives of the trip were at the Twilight Zone. I stayed over in Ambon with Maluku Divers and dived the area yet again, but had one of their guides who showed me many things I'd missed on my previous dives.

THE TWILIGHT ZONE



Painted frogfish

Crab peering from burrow

Brace of moray eels

Leaf scorpionfish

Rhinopias



Streaming Silversides

BOB HALSTEAD, THE GODFATHER OF MUCK DIVING, ONCE DEFINED IT AS 'DIVING THAT TAKES PLACE AT ANY SITE WHICH DOES NOT HAVE BEAUTIFUL UNDERWATER SCENERY'. WELL, THE TWILIGHT ZONE ISN'T PRETTY UNDERWATER AND CERTAINLY MEETS BOB'S CRITERIA. FOR MOST UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHERS, MUCK DIVING TYPICALLY MEANS A SITE WITH LOTS OF UNUSUAL AND PHOTOGENIC CRITTERS AND TWILIGHT ZONE ABSOLUTELY FITS THAT BILL - I'VE NEVER SEEN SUCH A DIVERSITY OF CRITTERS IN ONE RELATIVELY SMALL LOCATION!



magnificent muck^o

Striped catfish



Solor boxfish



Trumpetfish

The site is near Laha village, roughly half way up the bay's northern shore. Close to the airport, the main jetty (the epicentre of Twilight Zone) is actually known as the 'aviation jetty' because it's where aviation fuel for the airport is brought in by tanker and unloaded. When not hosting fuel tankers, the jetty is home to a small fishing fleet that plies the rich waters around Ambon and ships its catch to Bali. It's the organic and inorganic waste from the fishing boats plus freshwater run-off from the river entering the bay nearby, the sheltered location plus the currents and cold water upwellings that combine to create the conditions that nourish this incredible ecosystem.

The inorganic waste is everything from car tyres to filing cabinet drawers discarded over time which has created a

sort of underwater junkyard now housing a diverse collection of critters. The bulk of the organic waste is from fish carcasses thrown over the side after the catch has been cleaned and filleted. When this happens the Zone's bottom-feeding inhabitants emerge to gorge on the waste.

The first time I was underwater during one of these feeding frenzies, I was about 15 metres away from the actual action and blissfully unaware until the visibility suddenly rapidly decreased due to a mini underwater sandstorm! I went to investigate - a huge catfish swarm was devouring the flesh left on the fish carcasses, their action so intense that they threw up the surrounding black volcanic sand into the storm which drifted down into the depths. Darting in and out of the catfish were a number of moray eels,

risking a daylight foray to share in this sudden bounty!

There are dozens of moray eels in the junkyard underneath the fishing boats; every opening here seems to be occupied by at least one moray - but often two or three are co-habiting. Morays are typically nocturnal and one late afternoon I settled quietly in front of the main junkyard area and waited patiently to see what happened. Over 15 minutes one head after another appeared until in the fading light I counted over 20 different eels contemplating their night time activities - quite a sight! There are usually five or six fishing boats tied side by side at the aviation jetty, creating a canopy over the main area, hence the feeling of continuous twilight experienced if diving during the day. Most boats are running generators, so there's the

constant rumble of diesel engines above adding to the overall eeriness!

Below the jetty is a large shoal of silversides that seems to continuously migrate between the columns and then out underneath the fishing boats in a brilliant flowing stream. Diving the jetty around noon on a sunny day means it's time to swap the macro lens for wide-angle - and we're talking fish-eye wide. Shafts of sunlight blasting through the gaps between the boats and the jetty create dappled patterns on the volcanic sand. The silversides seem to get particularly active at this time and it's a sight to behold as you sit in the shadows, diesel engines throbbing overhead, as they stream out through the light columns, underneath the boats then back again.

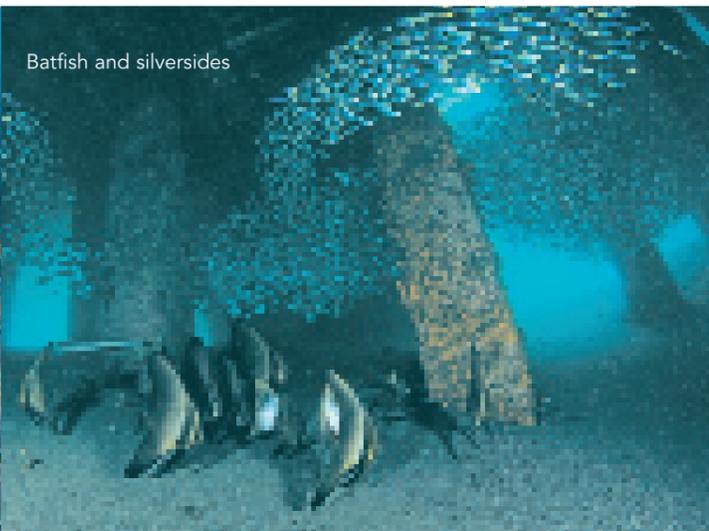
At night the site transforms again as fish and critters active during daytime settle into their hiding holes and nocturnal predators emerge. Extra care is needed after dark as there's so many potentially stinging and poisonous things to kneel on such as stonefish, a profusion of scorpionfish including lots of the Ambon variety, urchins around the junkyard area and of



Snowflake moray eel



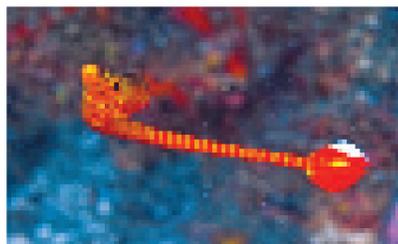
The junkyard



Batfish and silversides



Giant frogfish



Mantis shrimp caught in fishing net



Indian mud moray eel

course morays which may be out foraging! There's a second pier on the small headland sticking out into the bay which affords protection to the Twilight Zone. This is also well worth investigating but the absence of a junkyard and proximity to the strong currents in the bay seem to make it a less 'target rich' environment than the aviation pier.

Around the headland is the site referred to as Laha 2 and sloping sands here are well worth investigating, though care needs to be taken with the fairly strong currents in this area. Ricard Buxo told me he had seen two of the much sought-after Rhinopias in the shallow seagrass area here, but when I first dived there I couldn't find them – lots of other interesting stuff, but no Rhinopias! When I returned with Maluku Divers, my guide took me down to 32 metres and introduced me to a beautiful purple Rhinopias – and then a stunning red one at 28 metres!

Heading slightly further west is a third jetty which I didn't dive under but the whole area is referred to as Laha 3 – one dive I did there was very enjoyable. But I have to

admit that the Twilight Zone is my absolute favourite muck dive site in Ambon – it is just the best!

AMBON ISLAND (Pulau Ambon) is the capital of Maluku Province of Eastern Indonesia. It's main town Kota Ambon is the most developed in the area. In the 17th century, when the spice trade was at its peak and Dutch monopoly of cloves it's strongest, Ambon was their base in the east and known as the 'Queen of the East'. Kota Ambon was devastated during WWII by aerial bombardment. Dutch colonial buildings were destroyed and now Kota Ambon resembles many other Indonesian cities. The Ambonese are predominantly Christian, due principally to their Dutch colonial history, but there's also a significant Muslim population. Long a model of peaceful co-existence, tensions between the two communities related to Indonesia's severe economic and political



Map of Ambon; 1725-1727; Coloured engraving, taken from Valentijn's 'Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indien'. Derived from the Atlas of Mutual Heritage; www.nationaalarchief.nl/amh/



problems at that time, erupted in 1999. The area was a tourist no-go until early 2002 when tempers cooled and the area started to return to normal.

There are still clear reminders of the 'troubles' but it's now very much business as usual and the economy is growing strongly due to the influx of reconstruction funds.

GETTING THERE Ambon is remote but well served by domestic Indonesian airlines.

I flew Qantas from Sydney to Jakarta and overnighted at the Airport Hotel in the actual terminal. I caught the early Garuda flight to Makassar in southern Sulawesi and then Lion Air to Ambon, arriving just after lunch and in time for a dive at the Twilight Zone! There's also a red-eye flight from Jakarta which arrives at 07.00 in Ambon.

BAGGAGE I had no problems with excess baggage either way despite all the gear I carried and apparently Lion Air allow 30kg of check in for divers!

VISAS A visa is required for Indonesia.

MONEY You get about 7000 Rupiah to the A\$ and 9000 to the US\$, so you can quickly become a millionaire... It's best to change a few hundred dollars at the airport on arrival as credit cards are not generally accepted except in major hotels.

SAFETY I've traveled fairly extensively in Indonesia for diving and on business over the past seven years and I've never had a serious problem. I'm always careful and think ahead but I have no hesitation in visiting – in fact my wife and I recently bought a place in Bali as a base for future travel and exploration in Indonesia!

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