



Sleek unicornfish school off Pulau Tiga, Banda Sea.

Sea of Plenty

Indonesia's Banda Sea gives divers steep walls, luscious reefs and a whole lot of snakes » BY ROD KLEIN

THE EXPERIENCE

An expedition aboard the *Arenui* to dive the pristine reefs of Indonesia's Banda Sea offers some of the world's most beautiful underwater scenery. If you've spent your whole life looking for the perfect destination, this might be it — untouched coral-encrusted walls, slopes and swim-throughs are bathed with crystal-clear water on almost every dive.

Banda is a more complete destination than most because few great diving destinations combine superb diving with such historical significance — the Banda Sea is home to one tiny part of the Moluccas — an archipelago east of Bali and west of Raja Ampat — that was once the world's only source of valuable nutmeg and cloves, and so the focal point of fierce battles between the Portuguese and Dutch in the 16th century and beyond. Although much has changed with

economic development, spice production is still important in the Spice Islands, as they were called, and guests cruising this region will experience exquisite sights, sounds and smells.

Of course the diving is the real draw. In Banda you can dive spectacular hard-coral reefs but also incredible muck sites in Ambon Bay, where you might have the chance to see the recently discov-



ered “psychedelic frogfish.” Best of all, the Banda Sea is the domain of the live-aboard — cruising from island to island is too far for day operators. It's very likely that on a weeklong live-aboard journey, you won't see another dive boat — and you'll have the reefs all to yourself.

NEED TO KNOW

> **When to Go** Head out between March and April or September through December, when the seas are calmest.

> **Dive Conditions** Water temps range from 80 to 85 degrees F, with visibility reaching 100-plus feet. Currents are mild to strong.

> **Operator/Price Tag** One of Indonesia's most luxurious live-aboards, the *Arenui* (thearenui.com) is \$425 per person per day. The “boutique live-aboard” features eight cabins — individually styled and furnished — for a maximum of 16 guests. A full range of spa and massage treatments are available on board, as well as dedicated underwater photography stations. Like other live-aboards in the area, it offers other itineraries throughout Indonesia to take advantage of optimal conditions.



A clownfish plays in an anemone at Batu Kapal, one of Banda's fishiest sites.

5 REASONS TO DIVE THE BANDA SEA

CORAL FIELDS
Imagine hovering over fields of elkhorn coral as far as the eye can see. That's the Banda Sea.

AMBON BAY
Before there was Lembah Strait, there was Ambon, home to many ocean oddballs.

THE ARENUI
Built from the ground up, the Arenui is five-star diving at its best. This classic live-aboard features two of Indonesia's best dive guides,

tasty food and classy accommodations.

BIODIVERSITY
Indonesia is located in the Coral Triangle with the world's richest underwater biodiversity. While the Banda Sea is known for its clear water, coral fields and walls, it also offers some of the largest sea fans in the region.

TOPSIDE ATTRACTIONS
Tours of the historical Banda Island, center of the Portuguese and Dutch spice trade, always provide an interesting counterpoint to a Banda Sea dive exploration.

THE BEST SITES OF THE BANDA SEA

There's something for everyone in Banda, which features sites with large and small animals, great visibility, wall dives and remarkably healthy reefs. The only downside is you should be an experienced diver before you make the expense to journey there — most of the sites in Banda are not ideal for beginners.

One of the most popular sites is Gunung Api, a small rock that rises up from the surrounding deep oceans. The underwater topography is made up of ridges with steep walls and spurs. It's got great fish life and excellent reef scenery, with plenty of sea fans and sponges. Ophidophobists beware: Gunung Api is most famous for its incredibly abundant population of sea snakes (and we're talking many dozens on *every* dive).

One of the fishiest sites in Banda, Batu Kapal's steep slopes and walls are home to myriad marine life and enormous sea fans. The main island of Banda Neira is a great place to find mating mandarin fish at dusk.

The island of Nusa Laut has beautiful corals and excellent reef life — a tribute



The psychedelic frogfish was recently discovered in Ambon Bay.

to the locals, who take great pride in their reefs. It's a popular destination due to its diversity of reef-fish species and its health and varieties of hard corals.

More than 1,600 feet deep, nearly 5 miles wide and 15 miles inland, Ambon Bay is the ultimate harbor — for ships

and marine life. About two miles inside the bay, on the northern coast, is the region's best macro site. The reef at Laha consists of a slope starting at 6 feet deep overgrown with a few simple corals, a huge variety of eels, cuttlefish, gigantic jawfish, fire urchins and sea squirts. The reef levels off at 40 feet before continuing down into the bay's murky depths.

Endless cascades of neon fusiliers interspersed with yellow and blueback fusiliers seem to roll down the reef slope at Karang Hatta; the fish life is so thick in places that it's impossible to see the reef. Out in the blue, there's a good chance you'll see some of the larger pelagics like dogtooth tuna, eagle rays, great barracudas and even hammerheads.

What makes Karnobol unique are the big bommies, rocks and outcroppings. As you descend down the steep slope dotted with immense and colorful gorgonians, sponges and soft corals, keep your eye out for the passing Napoleon wrasse and bumphead parrotfish, which frequent the area. On flatter sections, staghorn coral flourishes with its frosted white tips standing proudly aloft.

RODGER KLEIN (2)

THE DIVING JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME. THAT IS, UNTIL NEXT TIME.

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