

FAR AWAY



184 Harlequin ghost pipefish (*Solenostomus paradoxus*) amongst Whip coral (*Ellisella* sp.)









The uninhabited Wayag Islands are the landmark of the Raja Ampat Region



**OFF THE BEATEN TOURIST PATH,
THE MSV AMIRA IS CRUISING WITH
DIVERS AND MARINE PHOTOGRAPHERS
AMIDST BEAUTIFUL AND UNTOUCHED
ISLANDS OF THE INDONESIAN BANDA
SEA IN SEARCH OF THE ULTIMATE
DIVING ADVENTURES.**

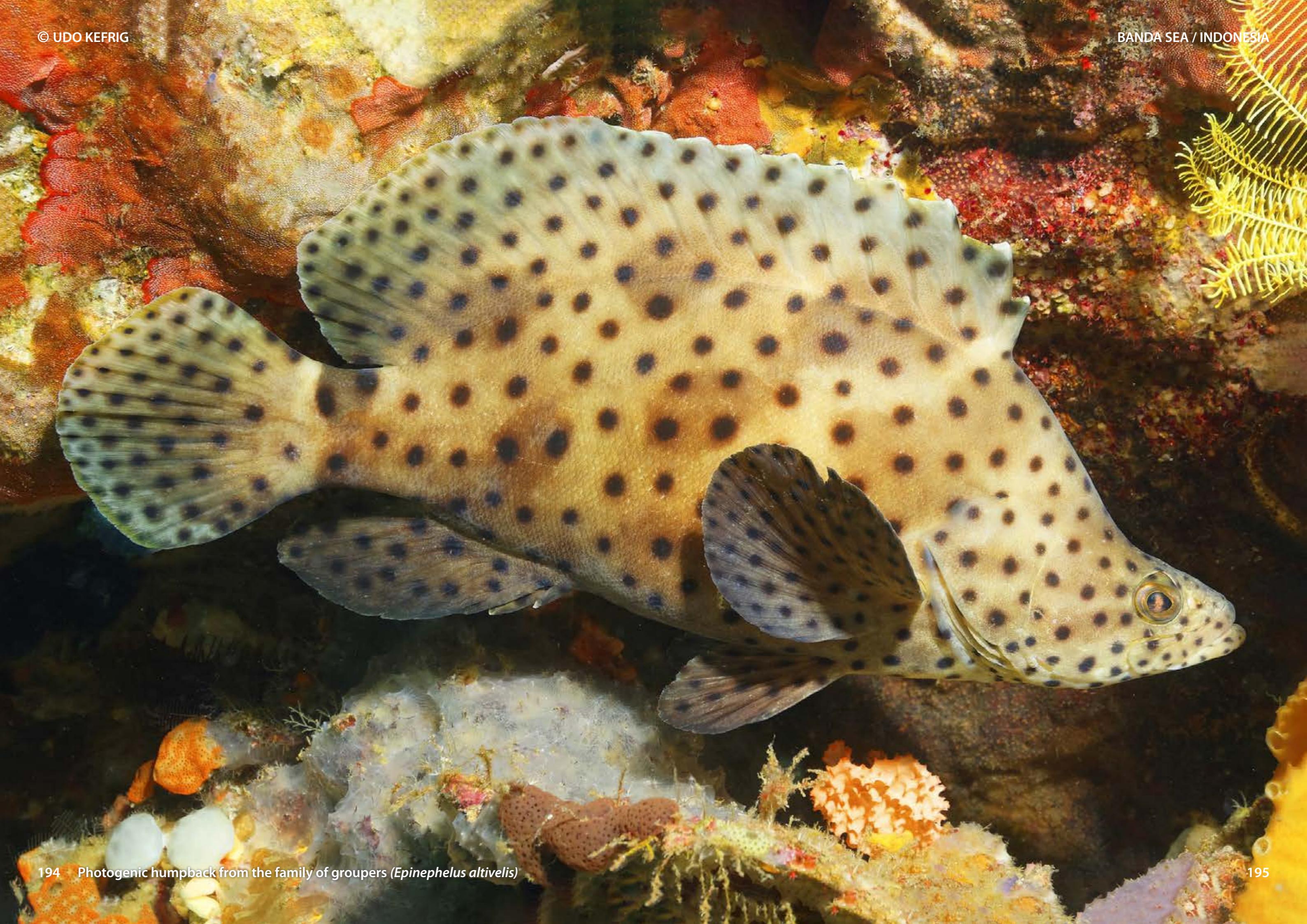
Photos: Udo Kefrig
Text: Rose Kefrig

Guest Photographer: Maik Solf, Reinhard Dirischerl, Urs Seleger, Andreas Müller, Werner Thiele, Gerald Nowak

From time to time it is said that diving has lost its adventures. I disagree entirely. This word adventure is spoken so often, but does anyone really have any idea what it means to be adventurous? Can one experience these adventures only with extreme diving trips? All right, you might argue that we divers are adventurous. We like to experience the unknown. Without batting an eyelid, we roll ourselves backwards into an unfamiliar world. And what awaits us? Awesome sharks? Giant whales? Are reef fish in every shade of rainbow colour, or is the world of critters not an adventure? Well, at least these are all fantastic motifs. Yet to me, adventure also means leaving one's comfort zone; flying with

the current or letting oneself drift; experiencing and opening oneself to the magic of maritime worlds and getting to experience everything from a totally different perspective ...

For our story we needed nine flights, 27,219 flight kilometres, 2,458 sea kilometres on the MSV Amira and 668 kilometres across the mainland by car! It is difficult to imagine, but Indonesia boasts over 17,500 islands. In addition, it has many airports located on both the small and large islands. After one arrives, it is possible to take advantage of cheap air fares to hop from island to island. What others probably would split on several scuba diving vacations, we experience far off comfortable ➤





196 The hairy squat lobster (*Lauriea siagiani*) can be found in and on large barrel sponges (*Xestospongia*)



Coconut palms, snow-white sandy beaches and a turquoise blue sea ...

resorts and tourist folklore in a four-week time-lapse with the MSV Amira ...

MOLUCCAS

One of the destinations in the Moluccan Sea is the island known as Bacan, in the Indonesian province of Halmahera-South, one of the many islets in the Moluccan Sea. Some people claim that there are 399 islands, but is this important? During the colonial period, the Moluccas became known as the Spice Islands. They are located exactly between Sulawesi and New Guinea. The landscape of the Moluccas is dominated by tropical rainforests, coconut palms, snow-white sandy beaches and a turquoise sea.

ALOR

Situated in the unspoilt Indonesian East, between Flores and the Savu Sea, lies the Alor Archipelago comprising two main islands, Alor and Pantar, which is separated by the Pantar Strait. This Strait is the Pearl of the Archipelago and hosts sensational dive sites.

Our guides enthuse about the biodiversity of the coral reefs. We're drifting with currents. I wonder if other divers might have been here before me, as the dive sites look so pristine and undisturbed.

We continue our tour to the »Forgotten Islands«, a more than 1000 km long, remote chain of islands that stretches from Timor to West Papua. We enjoy exotic culture and exotic



Magnificent crust anemones, gorgonians and sponges shape the reef image

islands. We are the only people on the islands leaving their footprints. We dive and snorkel in crystal clear water and enjoy a diverse aquatic world. The gods are kind to us and so we set sail. The tour leads to the western part of Alor, where a land-trip is planned.

CANNIBALS

Takbala, the Abui Indians' village, lies inconspicuously nestled atop a hill. Not so long ago they were a tribe of headhunters and fearsome warriors. They are still very proud about that, although now they only tell tourists about their old customs and traditions.

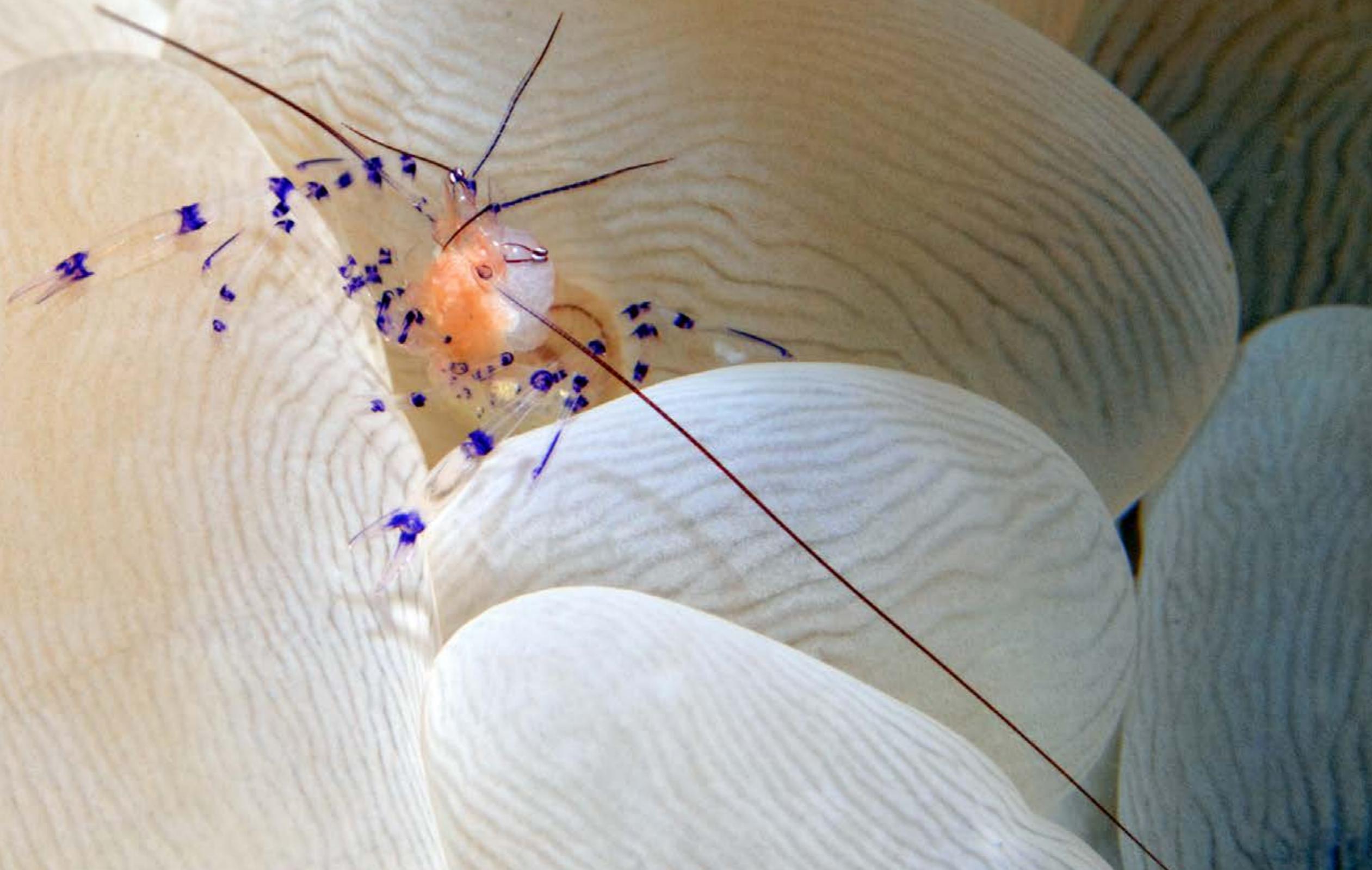
Three chiefs, Tamukung, Tinus and Abner welcome us with their tribe as well as a wild, ➤



Ribbon moray (*Rhinomuraena quaesita*)



200 Bigeye trevally (*Caranx sexfasciatus*). At dusk, when they start to hunt, only the ones that are big enough or which have found a good shelter in the reef survive





204 The whip coral (*Junceella juncea*) coils up to two meters into the current



The Abui tribe used to be head-hunters and fearsome warriors

intimidating dance. However, the Lego Lego is a dance of friendship and welcome-dance that is performed at all important life events. During the ceremony, the Abui women are dressed in colourful ikats, handcrafted with

a very traditional design. All the warriors are armed with bows and arrows. The Chief Tamukung explains that the Moko drums have been in their possession for 2500 years. They were once used as sacrificial cauldrons during ceremonies – fortunately the kitchen will remain cold. At 40 degrees in the shade, a shiver runs down my spine just thinking about ending up in a pot.

After the show we are guided around the village. Children run around, and women sell their merchandise. The whole atmosphere is very friendly – until I see blood splatters everywhere, droplets of blood on the pathways. Shrunken heads are dangling from their huts' gables. »Just get me out of here, « I think



206 A welcoming dance instead of a war dance



We disturbed him – the volcano Batu Tara on the holy island Komba rumbles

aloud, but our guide laughingly reassures me: »Those are just the traces of betel nut juice, that the locals chew and spit out. « Nevertheless, a queasy feeling deep in the pit of my stomach remains ...

APOKALYPSE

A noisy anchor chain pulls me out of my dreams. Overnight, the captain has made »Headway« and set anchor. The sun slowly ascends into the sky over the island of Pulau Komba Timur. Suddenly there is a loud rumbling sound ...

Starboard Komba Island presents itself steep and rugged. The island consists only of the 748-meter-high volcano Batu Tara. A muff-

led growl resounds from within. A huge plume of smoke above his funnel demonstrates that he's still alive. The volcano spits a mixture of hot ash, gas and glowing rocks into the skies. And a wide stream of lava slides down the mountainside and into the sea.

What a spectacle! I sway between fascination and panic as the loud eruptions continue.

The crew is in secret awe of Kombo Island. »Ancestral spirits are living here and therefore no one can visit the island« we are told. We are not interested in this either, since we want to dive.

The underwater world explodes with life. The rugged slopes are covered with spectacular hard, horn and soft corals while the huge ➤







Ocean sunfish (*Mola Mola*): If he comes close to the reef, he'll get all the divers' attention 213



A man-sized fan coral (*Melithaea sp.*) stretches into the current

sponges reach gigantic proportions. Evidently the volcano helps the growth with its emitted minerals.

Millions of glass fish share their habitat with large schools of blue stripe snappers. This black lava sand provides a backdrop for scurilous critters. A small boxer crab uses stinging anemones and carries them as a protective shield. A red crab is sitting with his eggs sits on a feather star. A delicate spider crab disguises itself with small fragments of its host coral. Not to be noticed seems to be important in this world. A boxfish, however, thinks otherwise, as it swims towards us seemingly blowing a kiss at us. A red-pink frogfish lurks in the sand waiting for his next victim. The

scorpion fish beside him stares fiercely. Day-to-day reef life!

THE WHALERS

At Lamalera, a fishing village on the island of Lembata situated in this solar archipelago, there are families who have lived from whaling and fishing for centuries. Unfortunately, the fishing quotas are very limited and so I experience the other, emotionally difficult side of nature conservation. For the whalers do not receive financial compensation. There is little money available on Lembata and often the only currency is a portion of whale or manta ray.

Anything that is not shared out in the village is exchanged for chickens, rice, fruit and



BANDA SEA / INDONESIA

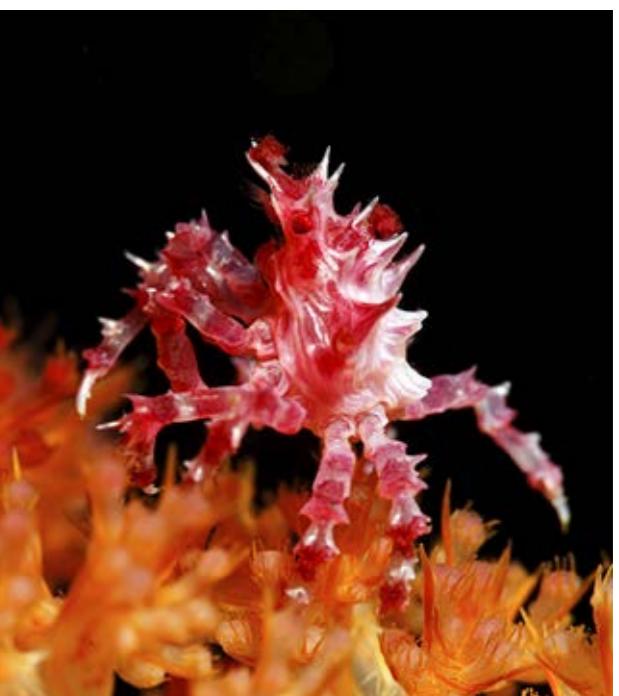


We are also warmly welcomed in the village of whalers on Lembata

vegetables at the local market. Apart from several active volcanoes there is very little on the island. Soils are barren. Time and again there are attempts to open up sources of income for people. In spite of the tourists it is often not enough for daily life. The village women generate extra income by selling hand-woven carpets, scarves and blankets. Ikat weaving is a special technique with dyed fabrics – a very nice souvenir for you.

VIRGIN

We dive during the day, travel at night. Each dive site is different! A Muck dive in the Matap Bay turns into a horror dive. A powerful current, pushes us downwards along a dark >



Candy crab (*Hoplophrys oatesi*)





Sea squirt (*Polycarpa aurata*)



Nudibranch (*Hypselodoris apolegma*)



218 Nudibranch (*Ardeadoris averni*)



219 Sea squirt and Tubeworm (*Sabellidae*)



Frogfish (*Antennarius striatus*)

222 Underwater Dust-Avalanche

sandy slope. Desperately we seek shelter and duck into every nook, as a brown cloud rolls down towards us like a sinister veil. Within seconds, we are engulfed by this brown avalanche. Visibility's zero. But as fast as the nightmare started, it is over again. I've never seen or experienced anything like it!

We now explore the Strait of Wetar. This is a strait in the Malay Archipelago and separates the island of Wetar in the north from the island of Timor in the south. We are in Buaya Bahaya at dive spots where no fish has ever met a diver. It reeks of adventure! Under the command »ready, steady, go«, from our dive guide», we descend into the water from our dinghy.



Unknown wreck off Pulau Masela

There is something special about this dive site. The reef stretches far into the blue water. One wall descends very steeply. It is overgrown with red barrel sponges, hard, soft and fan corals and is inhabited by all kinds of critters. There are hundreds of barracudas, bat and doctor fish shoals, mackerel and hunting tuna, providing a magnificent 60-minute show.

We even discover a wreck. Shattered and scattered it lies at a depth of between two and nine meters on a sandy ground. Corals have colonized the wreckage parts. Juvenile fish scurry back and forth. »Such a wreck is a wonderful nursery, « I thought to myself, until a few scary moray eels with their mouths wide open demanded my attention.

A few fin strokes further, a tubular creature crawls across the floor, the shape resembling male genitalia – were it not for a row of feathery tentacles coming out of a front-opening. They seem to move over the sand by touching and picking up small grains that stick to the obviously sticky arms. On board I recount my experience and am laughed at for my erotic fantasies about a sea cucumber.

FORGOTTEN ISLAND

For two days, no other ship appeared. But now there's commotion onboard. What's that spot on the horizon? There are several small canoes approaching, being followed by a bigger boat. An uneasy feeling. In this endless ➤





226 Thornback cowfish (*Lactoria fornasini*)



228 Barrel sponge (*Xestospongia testudinaria*)



Unspoilt coral reefs with leather and stone corals 229





Impressions from Sermata Island

nothingness of the ocean we suddenly receive company. Pirates?

But the young guys on the boat are very friendly and are asking for diesel and cigarettes. Where do they come from? We are told that we are lying in front of the Sermata Islands, immediately off the largest island of the same name in this archipelago.

Meanwhile the canoes have also caught up. There are cheerfully waving children in them all hoping to receive sweets. We decide to visit the island and are received just like always friendly.

During the midday heat it is not easy to find some shade. Sweat-drenched and accompanied by lots of children, I stroll through the

village. Occasionally pigs scurry about and free-range chickens forage through the dry sand. Laundry hangs in front-of-windows to dry and provides protection from the hot sun. I enjoy a couple of pleasant hours on a colourful island at the other side of the world.

CENDERAWASIH BAY

Heading to our next destination, there is a chance to dive with whale sharks: The Cenderawasih-Bay, formerly known as Dutch Geelvinkbaai, is a vast bay in the north of the Indonesian region of Western New Guinea. Natives fish with nets on large wooden platforms. They are the reason why there are so many whale sharks. The animals gather un-



The whale sharks wait under the platform for escaped or discarded fish

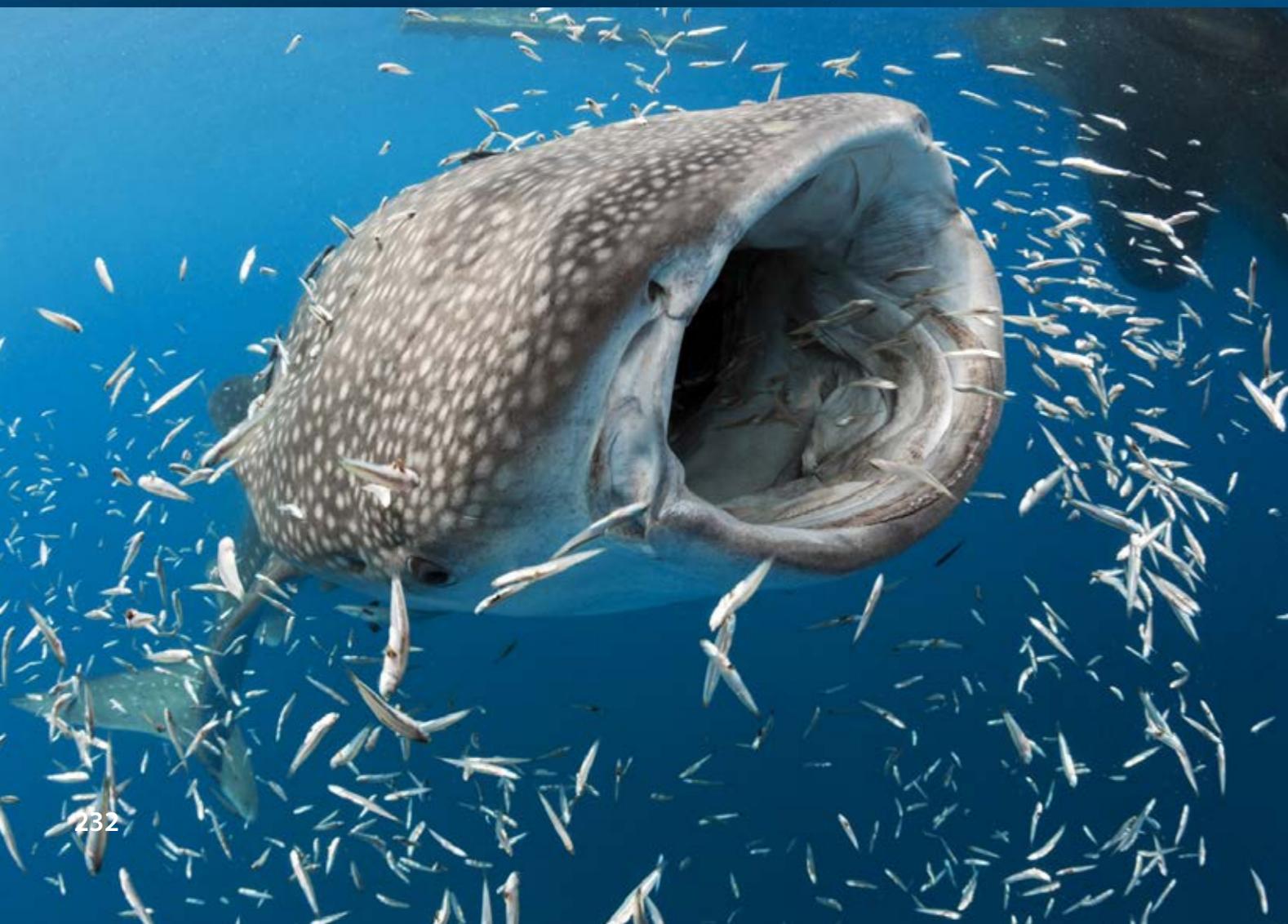
der the platforms and devour the fish, which slip out of the fishing nets or are discarded by the fishermen.

To the fishermen of Papua, the peaceful giants remain and have always heralded good fortune. For this reason, they always use part of their bait to supply the whale sharks with food to please the gods. Unfortunately, the fishermen on these platforms have learned to exploit the whale shark passion of the scuba diving tourists and demand a lot of rupiahs from us to dive with them.

The MSV Amira crew instructs us how to interact in order to experience unforgettable dives with whale sharks. It was one of the highlights of the journey. Since the bay is wit-

hin the coral triangle, you can observe not only whale sharks, but also beautiful reefs - with extremely good underwater visibility. ➤





Whale shark (*Rhincodon typus*) under the fishing platform of a Bagan, Cenderawasih Bay 233



234 The hairy squat lobster (*Lauriea siagiani*) can be found in and on large barrel sponges (*Xestospongia*)



236 A shoal of ribboned sweetlips (*Plectorhinchus polytaenia*) head-on in the current



Panoramic view from the island Batu Kalig over the coral bay

FOUR KINGS

Translated Raja Ampat means four kings. It refers to the four main islands of the archipelago: Misool, Salawati, Batanta and Waigeo. One can experience a biodiversity under water, with which not even the Great Barrier Reef in Australia can compete. This is why diving safaris to West Papua are in such high demand. Not least because Raja Ampat is still spared mass tourism. A world of islands and white beaches mostly nameless and uninhabited, surrounded by fantastic reefs with exuberant life. A true diver's paradise.

On this safari we enjoy an expedition-like nature adventure. Every diver has the feeling of being the first to dive into the submarine

world. Each site presents a unique experience that you will not want to believe still being in the same region as the previous dive.

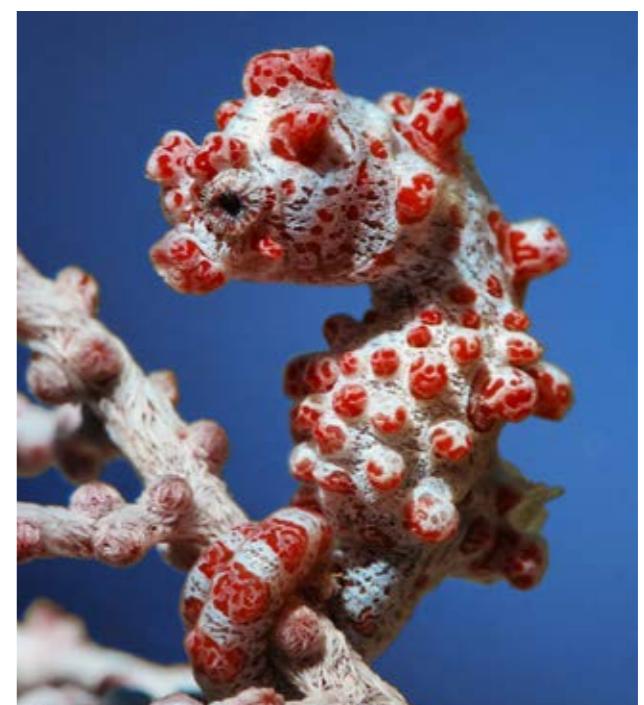
The currents, the waves and the swells are sometimes challenging, but they guarantee unforgettable encounters with all that the open ocean has to offer. They produce plenty of food, provide an impressive underwater scenario with large fish of all species, create habitats with various bizarre stone corals, huge sponges and gorgonian fans. And where the water between huge blocks and overhangs is calm, sweet lips, snappers, butterfly and surgeon fish and fusiliers rest, and curiously observe the unfamiliar fin wearers of the Upper World.



Postcard image in the reef: Barrel sponge, gorgonian and whip coral

You will find nature in harmony and balance. Again, and again emperor and butterfly fish, porcupinefish, pufferfish and boxfish cross our path. Clouds of Anthias swarm around the reefs. From crevices and ridges morays of all kinds gaze at us and at every turn lionfish threateningly splay their gills trying to impress us. I believe that the diving climaxes of this planet, far from any civilization, are gathered in this region.

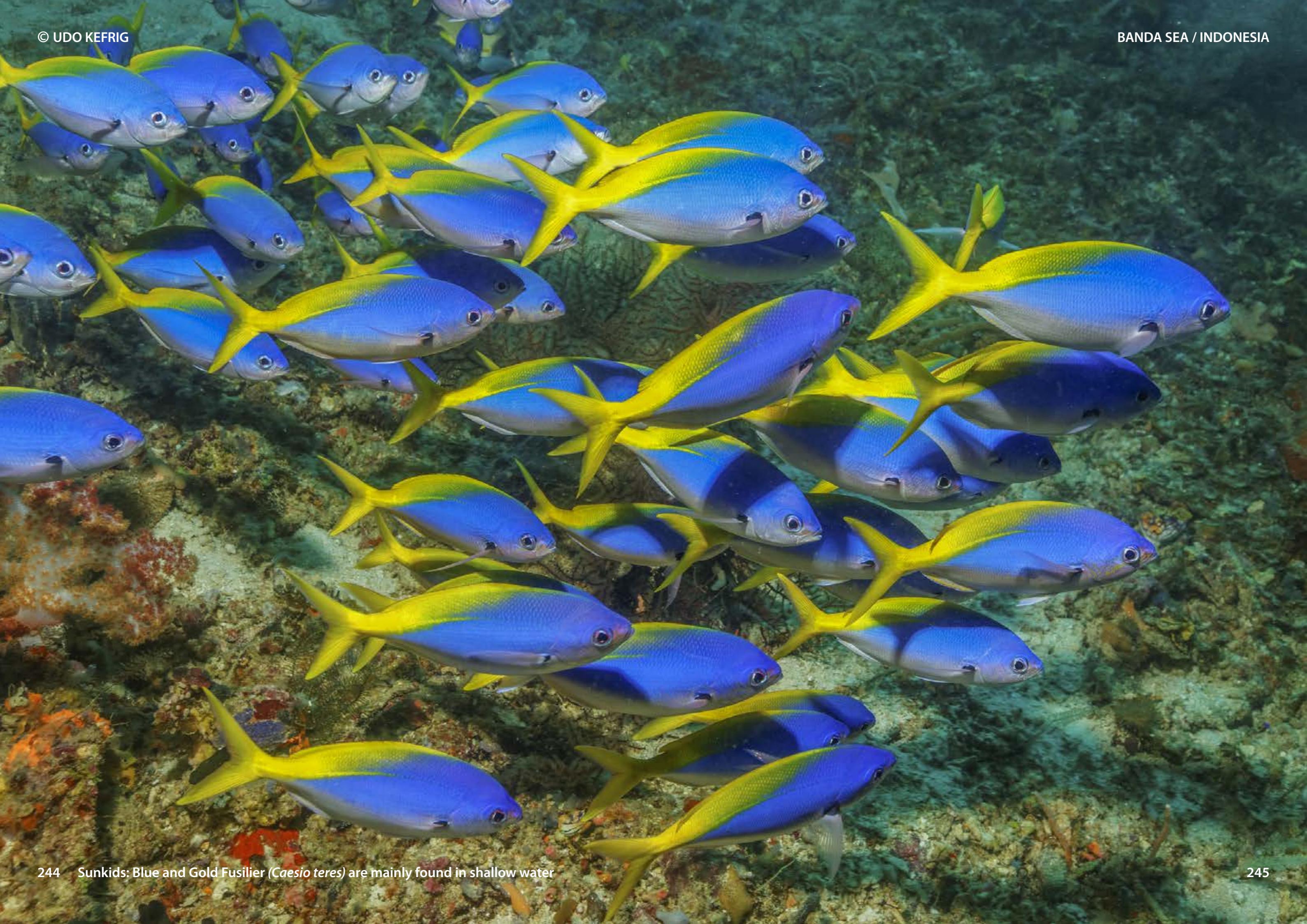
The varied habitats of the critters provide magnificent motifs for macro photographers. The guides of the MSV Amira are familiar with the reefs and will spot pipefish and seahorses, as well as the very popular pygmy seahorse, frogfish and mandarin fish, as well as scor- ➤



Pygmy Seahorse (*Hippocampus bargibanti*)









The Waisai children greet us in traditional war paint



© UDO KEFRIG

pionfish and other rare and bizarre inhabitants of the reef's species. Pegasus belong to the Critters as well as mantis shrimps, poisonous Blue-ringed octopus, wasp fish and ghost-pi-

pe-fish and an unbelievable spectrum of nudibranchs awaits you. My partner and diving buddy Udo, who has already travelled to many tropical dive spots, confirms his enthusiasm: I have never experienced such an attractive location for critter enthusiasts and photographers. «

You might think we're the only ones who got lost here. Nowhere do we see tourists. 1800 island – alone in the Raja Ampat archipelago – is also beyond my imagination. Wherever we go, meticulously we take our garbage with us, not wanting to leave any trace behind.

South of Waigeo Island off the coast of Western New Guinea, we visit Waisai. It is the capital of the Indonesian district of Raja Ampat. Once again, we are welcomed with dan-



Curious crawler: Orang-Utan-Crab (*Achaeus japonicus*)

ces performed by the children, as happen also on the neighbouring island Mansuar in the village Yenbuba at the eastern tip. Everybody welcomes us and beckons us or would like to be photographed. You will find everything you can think of here for sale, all sorts of colourful daily necessities.

ELATED

This voyage of discovery through the Indonesian Bandasee has turned out to be a treasure chest to me. I did not believe in experiencing a region where tourism is still in its infancy and where the warmth of the people is so genuine and joyful. And I saw them, the countless uninhabited sleepy islands with their

lush green palm trees, the white coral sandy beaches and the turquoise glistening lagoons on which the sparkling sun rays dance. Faraway – Somewhere Nowhere. ➤



© UDO KEFRIG
Mimic Octopus (*Thaumoctopus mimicus*)





250 Weedy scorpionfish (*Rhinopias frondosa*)



Anemone shrimp (*Periclimenes imperator*)



251 Spider crab (*Xenocarcinus tuberculatus*)





MSV Amira is off Wagmab Island, Raja Ampat - a secret photographer's recommendation for your route through the Bandas Sea



The shipowners (from left): Maik Solf, Rafika Lasama, Bruno Hopff, Manfred Hasler

MSV AMIRA

The motor sailer was built between 2008 and 2010 in the old Indonesian shipbuilding tradition as a Pinisi schooner made of tropi-

cal wood. The boat is ideal for diving cruises through the islands of Indonesia. The MSV Amira runs different tours in regions that are inaccessible without a vessel.

Shipowners Jürg Bärtschi, Maik Solf, Bruno Hopff, Manfred Hasler and Rafika Lasama plan and prepare the logistics and routes down to the last detail.

These tours are started from different places in Indonesia, which can be found on the websites of MSV Amira and of the tour operators.

The MSV Amira is equipped with the ENOS emergency call and location system, which provides additional safety for divers in current rich waters.



More Information:

- www.aquaventure-tauchreisen.de
- www.amira-indonesien.com

ROSE & UDO KEFRIG

Also known as Team OCEANPICS in the author scene, the German-English married couple share a passion for photography and diving in tropical but also native cooler waters. They have published various books and participated in TV productions. Their reports and photos are published in numerous national and international magazines.

- www.facebook.com/Oceanpics
- www.oceanpics.de



The author couple Rose & Udo Kefrig



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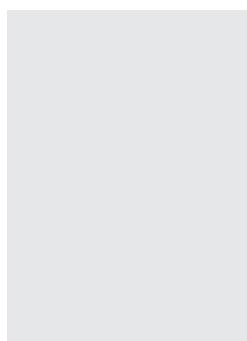
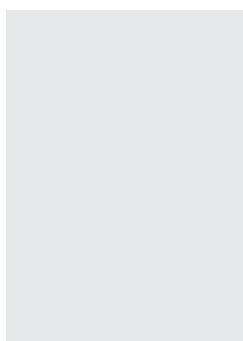
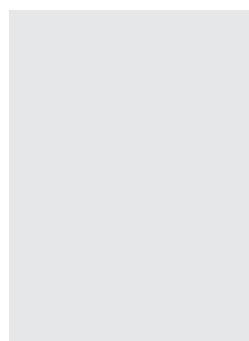
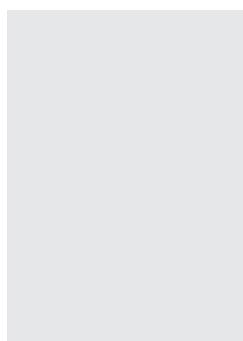
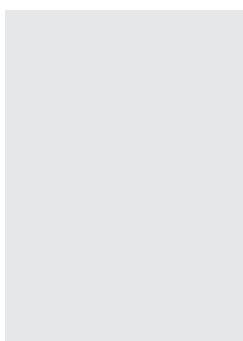
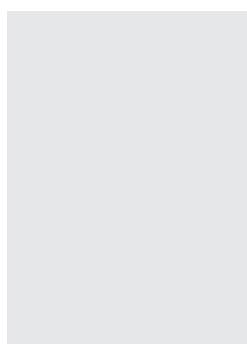
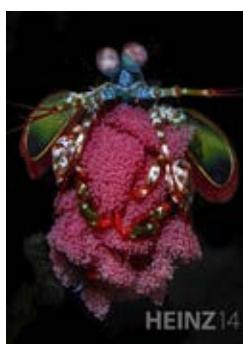


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AMIRA
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Rose Kefrig

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POSTAL ADDRESS

Kleestrasse 21–23

90461 Nuernberg

Germany

Phone: +49 911 23985471

eMail: info@heinz.press

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