

# Alor FISH SOUP

Pure pleasure! This original recipe originates from Indonesia. It is particularly diverse in exceptional ingredients. We just can't get enough of it and serve it with octopus, moray eel, frogfish, coral, sponges and lots of fish. And there is no destination too far for a good soup

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**S**urprise! This dish is not cooked. The kitchen stays cold. To enjoy this rich soup, we simply squeeze into a wetsuit, grab our dive equipment and jump into a rich primeval pot of fish stew! We long for great visibility at drop-offs, for sharks and big fish in abundance. We glide through diverse reefs, are carried by breath-taking currents and gasp at fantastic underwater landscapes full of biodiversity. Nudibranchs, in all colour variations, pipefish and other critters are waiting to be explored. A pot brimming.

Our dive safari started from Maumere and led us to Flores, Lembata, Pantar and Alor. Diving in the surrounding islands means variety - many dive sites, and incredible marine life. From little pygmy seahorses, fascinating mimic octopus, shoals of fish, right up to big predators and an abundance of corals and sponges, everything is on the menu. This fish chowder happily bubbles underwater, or offers you mimicry in perfection. But our advice - dive with a guide, this way you get to see more than you ever envisaged.

#### LIVEBOARD MSV AMIRA

Before we are shown to our cabin, we are giving a safety briefing about lifejackets, liferafts and a housekeeping brief. Literally translated, our safari ship Amira ([www.amira-indonesien.de](http://www.amira-indonesien.de)) is called Princess. She is innovative, equipped with a state-of-the-art navigation system, technology, security and rescue equipment, and was built by indigenous craftsmen using the ancient Phinisi boat-building traditions. With a length of 52 metres, the Amira offers nine comfortable double cabins and one single cabin, all equipped with personal showers and toilets and natural lighting. Meals are taken outside on the main deck or inside the restaurant with comfortable air-conditioned lounge area with comfortable sitting areas, TV and DVD player. Soak up the romantic atmosphere with a sundowner on the upper

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sun-deck, or simply chill on one of the other decks with a good book. Coffee, tea and water are free and three times a day a tasty fusion of Indonesian or Western food is offered. In between meals, snacks and fresh fruit is available. A larger variety of drinks and fruit juices, as well as beer, are available for purchase.

When we were shown the dive deck it was a nice surprise. Created by divers for divers, it is a generously designed space to gear up with a fixed site for each diver, several rinse tanks, plenty of surface space and a spacious camera room. All in all, a perfect base for the most beautiful dive excursions in Raja Ampat, Alor, Komodo and Banda. Ronan Debelius, the cruise director of the Amira, explained to us that the dive map of Alor is divided into two areas. The Strait of Pantar for wide-angle photography and the Bay of Kalabahi as a great spot for muck diving. He warned about strong currents - flow in the Pantar Strait often reaches up to 20 knots, develops strong whirlpools and even ships fight against them.

However, these currents supply the corals, and the tiny and bizarre creatures and fish with plenty of food. The islands are of volcanic origin and characterised by mountainous landscapes. At the same time, you will find lonely beaches as well as dense rainforest with a rich variety of animal and plant species.

#### TIME TO DIVE

After arriving in Kalabahi Bay, we watched as the first group of divers were getting ready. A few of them had not been to Indonesia before, but with these incredible dive sites situated in the heart of the coral triangle, they would not be disappointed. The Kalabahi Bay is a paradise for every muck diver looking for rare, alien-like creatures that camouflage and conceal themselves so cleverly that they are hardly visible to the untrained eye. There are currents and there can certainly be poor visibility, but the experienced ▶



guides know their way around. One of the best sites was the Mucky Mosque, located just behind the entrance to Kalabahi Bay. Fish traps, ropes, clothing and other artificial debris is found along the sloping reef, which are trapped around sponges and algae to provide a home for all kinds of strange weirdos, like the spiny seahorse, zebra crabs, colemani shrimps, squid and boxer crabs.

### PANTAR STRAIT

Sailing out of Kalabahi Bay into Pantar Strait, the underwater landscape changed dramatically. An explosive marine life welcomes divers in this remote corner of Indonesia. Dive sites are often like an underwater aquarium. And the dive sites around Pantar Strait revolve around a central theme - coral growth, fish life and high coral cover. Fed by incoming currents from the Indonesian Sea and the Pacific Ocean, the visibility during our voyage did not fall below 25 metres and reached up to 40 metres. In the northeast of Ternate Island, we got a little taste of diving in the Pantar Strait. At The Edge, you first come across a slope full of whip and soft corals that drop gently to a depth of 10m, followed by a drop-off that plunges over 100m into the abyss. Never have I seen such giant barrel sponge. Unfortunately, my dive computer reminded me that it was time to surface. I thought I'd seen many coral landscapes, but that was before my visit to Alor. You must be here to witness it yourself.



Returning from a tender dive

### BEANGABANG

You what? Beans-go-bang? No, just another dive site and the word seems to roll beautifully over the tongue, just like our backward roll into the small bay in the southwest of the Pantar Strait. At the Teluk Beang Reef you can glide over a dark sandy bottom with hard and soft corals and beautiful sponges and admire schools of fusiliers and sweetlips swaying effortlessly in the current.

Our daily dives produced frogfish in all colours and sizes, scorpionfish, flabellina, nudibranchs, crabs, numerous shrimps, lobster and the most searched for and well camouflaged rhinopias. The rhinopias, who are classified in the family of scorpionfish, come in various colours and different species. They feed on crustaceans, cephalopods and fishes and employ a lie-in-wait strategy, remaining stationary and ready for prey that comes near. With their mouth, they create a vacuum and suck the unsuspecting passer-by in during a nearly imperceptible split-second movement.

Crinoids adorn a barrel sponge



### PINK FOREST

Muck dive sites with black lava sand are generally referred to as 'deserts' and are relatively free of coral, but this dive promised to expose that cliché. Here we found a lot of soft corals, and crustaceans occupied almost every crevice, rare slugs seemed to bask in the penetrating sunrays, while yellow sea cucumbers, blue and green sea squirts and harlequin shrimps were unmistakable with very striking patterns. ▶

Macro subjects like this crab are everywhere





Emperor shrimp on a sea cucumber

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### KEL'S DREAM

One dive was very rewarding. This dive site is renowned and promised large pelagic fish. But you could end up on an express train. Diving conditions are not always ideal, and timing must be right. It is teeming with schools of small fish, including anthias and fusiliers. You need to kick your fins as the current is usually quite strong, but once there keep a lookout for barracuda and blacktips. Coral growth and diversity are impressive, but strong and unpredictable currents often mean that the average size of individual corals remain relatively small, but in incredible densities and all variations. Even in the wonderful world of macro you can find nudibranchs and blennies. The small blennies are ground-dwellers who can be found mainly in rocky biotopes, staring curiously from their hiding places.

### LAMALERA WHALING VILLAGE

But this trip was not all about diving and we had plenty of land excursions. Above water, colourful wooden fishing boats chugged back and forth from tiny islands. Laughing children, in self-carved wooden canoes, paddled like crazy towards the liveboards in the hope of a few sweets or even ABC equipment from the expectant divers on board who approach the remote islands. In the old whaling village of Lamalera, sperm whales have traditionally been hunted with harpoons for over 500 years. This has stopped and nowadays, schoolchildren demonstrate whaling dance elements, while the local women supplement the family income with ikat weaving sales.

Another great highlight is an excursion to the village of the Aboi hill tribe. The Abui are an indigenous ethnic group (also known as Barawahing, Barue or Namatalaki) residing on Alor Island. Up until the 19th century, they were headhunters. The now-retired headhunters perform their dance rituals in the



Pristine coral reef

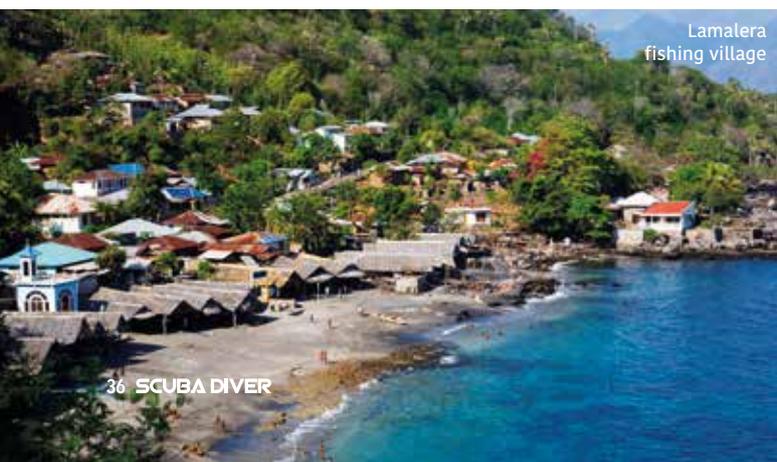


Porcelain crab in an anemone

Takbala village and welcome guests. At least we didn't have to worry about ending up in the pot! They are proud to share their culture and engage in songs and traditional dances known as lego-lego, in which the dancers move in a circular pattern and stamp their feet. Moko drums and gongs are rhythmically beaten.

### DIVING ALOR/INDONESIA

Diving in Alor is not easy. The currents in this primeval soup can be strong and unpredictable, and there is never a dive in the Pantar Strait where the pot doesn't simmer with fish. Even in the Kalabahi Bay, we experienced a slight drift during muck diving depending on the tides. The water temperatures can drop at any time due to the thermocline rising from the depth, so do not forget a beanie hat. To enjoy the beauty of Alor to the full, divers must have a high level of water confidence, and safety equipment, such as a surface marker buoy (and knowing how to deploy it), is essential. ■



Lamalera fishing village