

An underwater photograph featuring a large, intricate coral structure on the left, covered in various colors of coral and sponges. A diver in full gear, including a tank and mask, is positioned on the right, holding a flashlight and looking towards the camera. The background is a clear blue ocean with some small fish visible.

The forgotten **ISLANDS**

Hungry for adventure, **ROSE AND UGO KEFRIG** head for Indonesia's Forgotten Islands, a place of spewing volcanoes, island tribes and astonishing dives

Text by ROSE KEFRIG, photographs by UDO KEFRIG - TEAM OCEANPICS.DE



The coral growth is extensive



Crinoids on an immense seafan

“While my buddy is busy taking macro shots of pygmy seahorses, ghost pipefish, boxer- and orang-utan crabs, I watch a large shark swim elegantly past in his natural surrounding”

Sunrise over Pulau Komba Timur. The cabin clock strikes six times, accompanied by a menacing sound, deeper and louder than anything we have ever heard. There is a scrambling outside. Seconds later an apocalyptic spectacle unfolds on the uninhabited volcanic island in front of us. Suddenly, a low grumble can be heard from the inside of the mountain, sonorous and sinister. The crater hisses a snow-white giant steam cloud into the morning sky. The volcano Batu Tara is active and busy spewing a glowing mixture of ash, gas and rock into the air, destroying everything it comes into contact with. Thick ash clouds and glowing lava flows down the mountainside into the sea. Everyone can see: this mountain is alive and, with it, the sea. But how dangerous can a volcano be? Fascinated and a little scared, do we watch this unique spectacle of nature and the power this volcano displays? We are gripped by the urge to dive around the fire-breathing mountain and into the deep of the Banda Sea. This step into the deep, unknown environment has got to be meticulously planned. What lies ahead in the next few days? What are we to expect visiting islands and dive spots no one knows much about? The live aboard Amira is lying still in front of the Forgotten Islands of Indonesia. This volcanic eruption has shown us that adventure is all about discovery; it is about going to new places and experiencing new sensations.

In the footsteps of bygone times

For two years, three remarkable men puzzled over the route. Organiser Maik Solf, the Swiss Amira co-owner Bruno Hopf and Indonesian dive fan Michael Bode worked out the distance, daily dive expeditions and exact timing of this explorer tour to the finest detail. Together, we are now on track to discover largely unexplored and almost-unknown places. These islands of Indonesia belong to the most south-easterly Mollucas and extend to a distance of more than 1,000km from Wetar in the west up to the Kei-and-Aru Islands in the east. It's a real highlight for divers and you can call it a discovery of the unexpected. Other than the MSV Amira and one other ship, these chains of islands east of Timor are rarely visited. It is a Garden of Eden somewhere in nowhere and the complicated arrival and departure is strenuous. One thing is certain, on this tour, not everything is going to go according to plan and challenges will arise.

Fish stew and blood of the earth

With an almost-inexhaustible perseverance, the volcano continues to spew his blood into the sea. Each grumble is met with cries of 'oh' and 'ah' from the guests. Meanwhile, Bruno and his crew are exploring the clear waters and do a current check. They can change suddenly in these waters. After a detailed briefing we follow our passion. The first group is ready to go below to the roomy dive deck. To enjoy the underwater world in peace, the guests are split into individual groups and assigned to three differently sized dinghies and driven to the designated diving spot. The smell of sulphur is strong, like rotten eggs. It is only a few minutes to our dive spot. Nothing can hold us back! Splash, with a backward summersault we dive into the unknown. The volcano has created a wonderland. Under those conditions, admiring the underwater fauna and flora is easy. At 35m the steep walls are densely covered with gorgonians. Reflecting sun rays bathe the small valleys in a wonderful light and provide a constantly changing perspective. Huge barrel sponges, gigantic table, fan, stone and spectacular staghorn coral as far as the eye can see, thrive in this mineral-rich water. Wherever you look it is teeming with fish! The magical silence is only broken by the sound



Barrel sponges adorn the sheer walls

“The trips to the Forgotten Islands are for true explorers and those divers seeking out something new and unusual, taking you from one secret paradise to another”



Returning from another amazing dive

of our bubbles escaping to the surface. Luckily enough, there is no evidence of illegal dynamite fishing. We can only pray that it remains this way! My dive buddy does not know where to point his camera first. The only creatures offering more colours of the rainbow are the plentiful nudibranchs and ghost pipefish trying to disguise themselves on the large gorgonian branches. Rhinopias and strange critters lie perfectly camouflaged on the bottom. The wildlife is unparalleled in this world. We swim in a fish stew. However, this is only a taste of what awaits! It is frightening to admit how time flies. Shortly after sunset our ship is bound for sea as we travel overnight to our next dive site. After an excellent dinner, Bruno spreads a detailed sea map on the table. With elbows on the table and heads in our hands we discuss our next destination to the east, towards Alor. Suddenly, glowing smoke, which looks like fireworks, spews out of the volcano and the blood of the earth runs slowly downhill. What an eerie, striking scenario!

A good fusion

From the moment our luggage was lifted onboard, to the time it was delivered back onshore, the crew of the Amira has only our personal comfort and safety at the forefront of their minds. Between the dives they take perfect care of our physical wellbeing. With a friendly smile, sweet, spicy ginger tea (which clears your sinuses) is offered along with freshly pressed orange juice to wash the sea salt from your lips. What comes out of the ship's galley is a delicious fusion of Indonesian and European cooking. It is always freshly prepared before being served in the restaurant or front deck. Breakfast is a selection of hot and cold dishes. Lunch also adheres to a buffet-style format while dinner is generally a four-course set menu. A television and DVD player, a well-stocked library, free biscuits, coffee, tea and water is available 24 hours a day and free of charge. The delightful front deck is also where the onboard entertainment and get-togethers take place. The crew has its own unique way of evening entertainment. Guitar pop from room boy Andi Darr harmonises perfectly well with that of Britpop - and the evenings are filled with fun and laughter.



Hard corals are in evidence too

In the shadow of the mango groves

For days, Michael Bode has been enthusing about the great warriors of the Abui-Tribe. Up until the last century, they were known to be head-hunters. Quite to the contrary, they are some of the friendliest people we've met in Indonesia. After we returned from an exceptionally current-swept dive, we set off on the trip. The journey took place in a battered old bus with open doors and at hair-raising speed through a landscape characterised with breathtaking palm groves, large cashew trees and guava bushes toward the Takpala Village where the tribe lives. It is a traditional village inhabited by the Abui, who still strictly practice their culture, actively hunt with bows and arrows and live in raised bamboo huts. We are greeted with loud shouting and singing. In fact, they had their bows and arrows out as we stepped foot in the village. The mango trees offer welcoming shade in the hot midday sun. We had come to the village with the intention of just getting a glimpse of their daily life. But instead, we ended up spending several hours with them and it was possible to watch the tribe's people doing the Lego-Lego dance, tour a traditional house and buy local handicrafts. The village chief proudly presents three Moko drums, mysterious drum-like objects that the tribe uses as dowries. Nobody really knows how the Moko came to Alor. The Abui say that they are true gifts from the gods,

Illuminated soft coral



which they found buried in the earth. Historians believe that they were produced by the Vietnamese Dongson culture, which had trade links with the Indo-Malay archipelago more than 2,000 years ago. They are used only at weddings and special events. We must be special! Later we return to the Amira and find a few local women on board as they proudly show us their handicrafts.

Colourful creation

What could be better than to fall asleep listening to the waves and feeling the warm sea breeze rustling through the window? There is hardly anything more astounding than to wake up at a new destination and dive spot. But not everything goes according to plan. There is the ship's bell, which rings too early, calling us for our briefing. How I long to stay in bed, but divers are known to be notoriously early risers. Bruno and the crew have returned from their check dive and sit smiling at the breakfast table. This can only mean that an incredible dive spot beckons. A vibrant reef system lies northeast. The top of this huge reef starts at 8m and descends step-like to the abyss. Welcome to the unique, colourful, stunning and hugely diverse world of the coral reef and its inhabitants. The sloping wall is wedged full of plentiful growth and an abundance of critters. In the blue, huge shoals of tuna and mackerel hunt for food. While my buddy is busy taking macro shots of pygmy seahorses, ghost pipefish, boxer- and orang-utan crabs, I watch a large shark swim elegantly past in his natural surrounding. If there truly is paradise, it has to be here. Several further dives follow. We find an unknown wreck which is strewn at a shallow depth of 9m. It is a nursery to juvenile fish - they have found their perfect home.

The MSV Amira



Final countdown

Slowly we are reaching the final destination of this wonderful tour. Michael Bode takes the opportunity to tell us about the Forgotten Islands of Indonesia. Eagerly we listen as he tells us the Forgotten Islands are a remote chain of islands spanning over 1,000km, embedded in a magnificent landscape far from the hustle and bustle of metropolitan areas. They extend from Timor to West Papua and were discovered by the Portuguese. Ever since, the main trade has been in spices. These volcanic islands offer some of the best and still largely unexplored dive sites in Indonesian waters - clear, deep blue waters, endless reefs and spectacular walls of colourful coral. The trips to the Forgotten Islands are for true explorers and those divers seeking out something new and unusual. But we all agree: our explorer tour with the Amira has brought us a little closer to the Forgotten Islands, even if they are tens of thousands of kilometres away from our daily lives. ■

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW MOLLUCAS/INDONESIA



HOW TO GET THERE

There are direct flights from London to Singapore and connecting flights to Jakarta and on to Maumere.

WHEN TO VISIT

Indonesia is not greatly affected by seasons which prohibit diving, so instead it is more important to factor in the weather and the calmness of the seas in terms of enjoying the crossings, when planning a trip to this remote archipelago. Remember, this is true explorer territory, so you never know what to expect.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

A valid passport with six months left to expiry.

CURRENCY

Indonesian rupiah (£1 = IDR 20,286).

WHERE TO EAT AND MEET

The kitchen is a fusion of Indonesian and European cooking. Meals are taken in the restaurant or at the front deck.

VERDICT

MSV Amira is your ticket to Indonesia's best dive sites. It is a liveaboard trip like no other and, despite being an organised tour, permits each diver to feel like an explorer. The reefs are gorgeous and the marine life extensive.