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Return to the Spice Islands

Once coveted for its spices and then forgotten, the Banda Islands are now sought for what lies beneath.

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Crinoids adorn a sponge.



Caves and overhangs in the Banda Sea.

In the 16th century, the European nations made a beeline for them because they offered Europeans what could not be found in their own lands: Nutmeg and cloves, which were used to flavour and preserve food. The Banda Islands — or Spice Islands — were the only source in the world for these highly prized spices. The Portuguese, the Dutch and the British constantly fought over who would have the monopoly of the region and the spices. But once spices were successfully cultivated elsewhere in the world, the world's interest in the islands waned.

Today, the Spice Islands are back on the hot list — and it has nothing to do with spices or colonisation. Instead, divers are clamouring to visit the islands' dive sites, which some have rated as one of the most bio-diverse regions in the



Exploring mangroves in a canoe.



A mantis shrimp stands his ground.



A mandarinfish appears at dusk.

The islands have been rated as one of the most bio-diverse regions in the world for their wealth and variety of marine life.

world for their wealth and variety of marine life. Asian Diver takes a trip out to visit the islands and their surrounding gems.

NUSA LAUT

The closest island is Nusa Laut, which lies 160km south-east of Ambon. Here, dive enthusiasts will appreciate the varieties of hard coral that lie in shallow waters, inhabited by a flurry of mantis shrimps, thousands of dancing purple anthias, with the occasional brilliantly coloured coral trout meandering between the coral heads, while neon-blue cleaner wrasse wait for "customers".

PULAU SUANGGI

This densely forested outlying island is populated by thousands of frigate birds. Underwater, leather corals cover the reef plateau and at the edge of the drop-off are spreads of blue tube sponges, shaped like organ pipes, that extend beyond the reef. An endless passage of fish seems to be heading through it, enticing the diver to follow. It is so easy to get caught up in all the reef's activities — there is so much going on.

BATA KAPAL

An uninhabitable volcanic island, Bata Kapal is also known as Ship Rock because of its shape and the wake made by currents from the Banda Sea as they hit the island. Fusiliers, surgeonfish and thousands of pyramid butterflyfish feed on the nutrients carried in by the waves. Off the reef, a patrolling group ▶

An octopus eyes the camera.



of dogtooth tuna make nervous butterflyfish and fusiliers scatter towards the sanctity of the reef.

MAULANA HOTEL

Located on Banda Neira is the Maulana Hotel, which sits on the water's edge. Among the rocks, amid the rubble, old light bulbs and rotting rags offshore, is a community of giant mandarin fish, fish so big that we thought that they must be on steroids — far exceeding the maximum 6cm size that is quoted in books. One wonders if the nutrient-rich waters had anything to do with it.

MISOOL ISLAND

The fish and corals around this remote island grow in incredible numbers and the reason could

be the unpredictable currents and the nutrients they bring. The colours of the soft corals come in eye-popping orange, purple, red, yellow, pink, green and white. Running the length of the island is Razor Reef, a series of sharp ledges that jut out at an angle — much like the skin of a pineapple. Bushy hard corals and blossoming soft corals break the edginess of the reef structure.

JAMUR BOO

This island was probably much bigger in times past, but now looks like a series of jagged teeth with sheer rock cliffs, spread over a hundred metres; it was as if someone had taken a saw and sliced vertically through the island to break it up. Huge sea

A huge reef scene in Misool.



History lesson

For divers who want to learn more about the Spice Islands, a visit to the main island of Banda Neira is a must. Many of the colonial buildings have been restored including Fort Belgica sited strategically above the town, with its original canons still pointing out to sea. The views from this point are stunning. You can see the rest of Banda Neira, Banda Besar, Gunung Api, the active volcano and, of course, nutmeg and clove trees growing everywhere.

fans and barrel sponges occupy the shallow valleys in between, with pygmy seahorses living comfortably in the fronds of a sea fan. ▶

A hermit crab searches for a new home.



A dotted-back wrasse relaxes.

A goby guards his sandy patch.



A hawkfish blends into the coral environment.





The Seven Seas.



A wrasse fish sits waiting on a soft coral.



A female clown nestles in an anemone.



A polyp looks shelter on a soft coral.

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Another spot worth diving is Ferundi's Cave. Here, you'll have to swim under an island and into the cave to access a reef wall. Further along the wall is a larger, underwater opening that eventually opens up into a bat cavern.

MELISSA'S GARDEN, FAM ISLAND

Melissa's Garden is affected by currents from all directions. Hence, it is rich with soft corals, leather and brain corals. Wobbegong and epaulette sharks often rest in the shelter created by the coral heads.

When the currents got too strong, we dived around the island of Kerua instead. A steep wall on the one side is where the orang utan crabs live inside hard corals, while small, yellow robust sea cucumbers have colonised this wall. It is also a haven for nudibranchs and starfish. In a slit in the wall, a family of lionfish works together to trap errant glassfish.

Much of this region remains unexplored. You can literally close your eyes and point to any part on the map — which could turn out to be your next exciting dive site!

Where the Spice Islands were once

Many of the islands remain unexplored. You can literally close your eyes and point to any part on the map and it can be the next new dive site.

known to enhance culinary delights, they now whet the appetites of seasoned divers looking for new frontiers and unexplored islands. **SD**

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