



East of Flores Day by Day, September/October 2016

Trip Report by Diane R. Smith. Photos by Phil Burghard, Anders Osterballe, Carolyn Tyler & Lynn Morton.

The first day of diving in Maumere Bay was pretty good. We saw Orangutan crabs hiding in bubble coral, clown triggerfish, a large shark, a huge turtle, lots of schools of fish, and very healthy reefs. The second day of diving at Ipet Island was even better, with healthy, perfect, colorful reefs and huge schools of fish. And the third day, diving around Pulau Rusa, was completely spectacular. On a par with the best diving we have had anywhere. Everything was covered in the most intense colors of sponge and coral; orange, vibrant greens, deep burgundy red, bright yellow, black and white. Huge barrel and other sponges, some the size of houses, sea fans as big as cars, bright blue starfish, clouds of fish, all vibrant with color. The reefs here are fantastic! On that third day, we dove one of the most gorgeous sites in this area, Rainbow Reef. It is truly incredible. The colors and life are equal to anyplace we have ever dove. And completely pristine and unspoiled. It was overwhelmingly beautiful.





On the fourth day, the diving improved again. If that is possible. The reefs in the area of the Alcatraz dive site are simply beyond belief. Vibrant colors, perfect condition, everything in exuberant good health. It is a diver's paradise, even better than Raja Ampat. At the Alcatraz site, there is a "forest" of tall (maybe 6" high) soft, black coral that looks for all the world like a forest of black trees, with substantial trunks (maybe 6-8" diameter) and branch-like structures. These corals look exactly like trees. It is ethereal and surrealistic. It is difficult to describe how gorgeous this area is. We voted to spend the whole day diving here. When we were not diving, we watched eagles fishing. The beaches are exceptional, beautiful white or black sand, completely uninhabited. Rugged terrain, backed by volcanoes that sport vertical stripes due to old lava flows down their sides, which makes the area even more breathtaking.

The water temperature is cold, with occasional warm spots, making the dives interesting from a comfort standpoint. The weather is so hot, you are grateful to get into the ocean. Then you hit a thermocline that is 20 degrees warmer. Then icy. Then hot. Then icy. The currents are unpredictable and can be extremely strong, often changing direction during the course of a dive. There are so many fish it is indescribable. Vast schools of Moorish Idols, literally millions of vibrantly colored reef fish of every description, including millions of chroma. Soft corals in candy colors, and huge, dramatically sculptural sponges and hard corals. Some of the table corals were 20 feet across. And everything was alive with communities of crabs, brittle starfish, gobis, nudibranchs, tiny shrimp, and squat lobsters hiding in the millions of varicolored Crinoids. Wire coral and gigantic fans were everywhere, along with huge stands of delicate, fern like corals, waving softly in the current. Absolutely spectacular.





Day five: first two dives were amazing. A completely different underwater environment. Black sand, very volcanic area, with steam rising from the rocks near the shore. Diving was spectacular, in a completely different way: Muck diving! Think Little Lembeh Straits, our favorite muck diving site! Not a lot of corals, but what was there was highly occupied. All over the bottom there were mimic octopuses, wonderpussees, one ringed octopuses, mantis shrimp, pipefish, jeweled urchins, box crabs, hairy crabs, sand divers, sea horses, juvenile lion fish hiding in anemones, and tons more. There was, literally, an octopus every five feet! Very easy dive. Shallow water (60 feet). Chilly, but very warm at the surface.

Day six: we dove the most incredible site, "Anemone Gardens." The bottom was completely covered with anemone of various species, in every conceivable color: red, orange, yellow, green, sapphire blue, purple, black, white, black and white, translucent, grey, and every possible combination of colors. Many places we dive have "carpet anemones" which are about a square meter in size, rather than the relatively small, round anemones we see in California or the Caribbean. Here, the anemones are the size of area rugs, and sometimes wall to wall carpet. They covered every square inch in almost all areas of this very large site, including the rocks. There was only one type of clown (anemone) fish at the site, and there were not enough of them to go around. Many, many anemones were "clownfishless," poor things. No porcelain crabs, no shrimp, either. Just a spectacular display of stunningly beautiful anemones. Everywhere. It is a must see site for anyone who dives here. But the water was quite cold; I wore both a wet suit and a hooded vest, as well as gloves, and was still cold. There was both current and surge, but the site is worth the effort.



Our second dive was equally splendid. Every conceivable type of soft coral and sponge, many we had never seen before (and we have booked over 3000 dives each). Every color you can imagine. Huge specimens! Many were out feeding, creating an even more rich display. It is difficult to convey how truly remarkable these sites are. Plus, there was some hard coral and schools of fish. As an added plus, the water on this site was warm. And today we saw two whales, but unfortunately we were not

in the water: one was off the skiff on the way to the first dive, and the other during the cocktail hour from the big boat. Very exciting! The crew said they were migrating blue whales.



In the afternoon we did some muck diving, and saw octopuses, mantis shrimps, blue ribbon eels, gorgeous hydroids and anemones, golden eels, and banded shrimp. At one bomi, (a sort of stand alone small reef) there was fresh water intrusion. It was so cold I could not tolerate it, and had to swim away to warmer water. When fresh water interfaces with salt water, there is a shimmer as the two meet, which you can see underwater. Sometimes the fresh water is warmer, but this time it was terribly, even painfully cold. A large school of juvenile salt water catfish also lived at the bomi, all nestled into a space at the bottom. Very cool day.

Day 7. Just another day in diver paradise. Celacela Ledge. Beautiful wall and reef, mandarin fish, sea snakes, eagle rays, other assorted miracles. Big thermoclines.

Day 8: First dive was yet another perfect reef and wall. Saw leaf scorpion fish, razor fish, blue ribbon eels, large schools, beautiful coral in perfect shape, nudibranchs and their rosette eggs. Watched spinner dolphins off the boat during second breakfast. Amazing critters! The two other dives were equally great, and included a sea snake, Mandarin fish, razor fish, and literally thousands of other fish in massive schools, each more impressive than the last. We had Dolphins again, including some spinners, all around the boat at the cocktail hour. Very cool.



Day 9: Beautiful wall followed by gorgeous reef. Saw gigantic bump headed parrot fish, thousands of fusiliers, dozens of schools of other fish, usual assortment of miracles. We dove VERY close (a few hundred feet away) to an active volcano named Komba, with an ash tail extending maybe 200 yards across, from the caldera several hundred feet down to the water. Lots of steam. Water was very warm. An hour later, when we came up, the volcano was a lot more active, and a new vent had opened up. Things are lively in the Ring of Fire!

Day 10: last full dive day. We dove a site called Cardinal, a shallow dive site known for pajama cardinal fish. Saw octopus, pipefish, razor fish, coronet fish. No current at all, warm water. Closer to civilization but it's still very, very good. Also dove Playground and another shallow site nearby. All were wonderful. We saw ghost pipefish, long nosed pipefish, rays, the largest mantis shrimp ever, and the usual humongous schools of fabulously colored fish. Great last full day of diving. What a trip!

Day 11: last dive of the trip was almost as good as the rest: turtles, Sharks, schools of fish, including a school of gigantic grey French Angelfish. The diving East of Flores is truly exceptional: as good or, in some ways and on some dives, better than anywhere else we have been.

Diane R. Smith

Seven Seas, October 2016