



A Wonderful Adventure - From Raja Ampat to Banda Sea, April 2017

Trip Report by David Gibb. Photos by Foued Khadachi.

It is about 9:45 on our first morning aboard the Seven Seas. We were up at 6:00 and in the water for our first dive of the day at 7:30. It was spectacular. Beautiful coral and clouds of fish are all around. Everything from a Pygmy Seahorse the size of the nail on your little finger, to a school of Napoleon Wrasse and big grey reef sharks. We just had breakfast and will be going in for our second dive of the day in about an hour. We are off to a great start and first full day on board. On our third dive we saw majestic Manta Rays that were easily 12 feet across. After diving, we took a trip to Bat Island where a colony of fruit bats spent their day hanging in the trees sleeping. The island was packed with them. Their wingspan can be over a meter. Other than their wings, they look like little foxes. Right at sunset, they all headed out to feed on another island. Clouds of them flew past our boat.



On our second day we were off at 5:00am for a trip to one of the islands to look for the Bird of Paradise. They tend to do their mating dance at sunrise at the top of the tallest tree on the highest peak. We started climbing while it was still dark. It was very cool to hear the jungle waking up. We

were lucky enough to see the Bird of Paradise as well as parrots, cockatoos and many other birds. Then our first dive, on a spectacular wall with clouds of beautiful fish. Our second dive was a drift in a fairly strong current. We saw more Mantas, Napoleon Wrasse and too many sharks to count. Just now, a small group of Pilot Whales swam right past our boat. The next site has set the world record for the most different species seen on a single dive. It is all pretty great!

On our first dive the next morning, we went to a spot where Manta Rays go to get cleaned by tiny Wrasse. I lost count of how many Mantas we saw. For most divers, it is a rare privilege to see even one Manta. Here, they were lined up to parade past us. And our second dive was one of my favorites. It was warm, bright and calm, and there was lots to see. We ended up under a jetty where fish go for shelter during the day. There were so many of them that when I looked up, I couldn't see the jetty.

As hard as it is to believe, the most amazing part of our next day was above the water. Our skipper skillfully navigated the ship into a tiny cove surrounded on all sides by the tall peaks and sheer cliffs of a maze of little islands. I think that this must be one of the most beautiful places on earth. Our dives, as always, were lovely. But, my favorite part was swimming around the islands. Each one is ringed with a shallow shelf of corral. Off the edge of the corral shelves, the water drops to over 30 meters of deep blue. Pure white sand has collected in the most sheltered coves. I swim for over an hour winding my way through and around the little islands. I found a spot to do some water exercises that was almost too perfect to believe. The water was warm, flat calm and crystal clear. The bottom was white sand. Cliffs rose up on three sides. Eagles were soaring overhead. White Cockatoos squawked as they flew from island to island. It all seemed too perfect to be real.



The following day we did some of the most spectacular diving that any of us have ever done. A few miles out into open water from the islands is a sea mount. It rises up to a plateau that comes to about 8 meters from the surface. Since it is the only feature in the area, it attracts an extraordinary amount of life. The hard and soft corals are incredibly vibrant. We lost count of how many Mantas Rays, sharks, Napoleon Wrasse, etc., etc., etc. that we saw. Clouds and clouds of fish surrounded us. Every nook and cranny in the corral was filled with life. Everyone agreed that it really was beyond belief. It is an amazing privilege to be here.

After our dives, we went to an island where they have information on the local ecosystems and where young Black Tip Sharks hang out and grow before heading out to more challenging territory. I took the opportunity to swim out and back along the shore. I soon noticed that I had company. A little Black Tip Shark about 2 feet long started swimming along beside me. He even turned when I did.



Every day we have gotten further away from other people. Today, we had a small group of idyllic islands all to our selves. The channels here are so deep that we couldn't anchor and had to use a mooring buoy. The water was so calm that it looked like dark blue paint. On our first dive today we got in and found two large Barracuda waiting for us. I don't think that they were happy to have us in their territory. We also saw the usual parade of beautiful fish and a couple of turtles, but the highlight was a massive Grouper. After diving, we took a boat ride around the islands. The tide was up so we were able to get into the little coves/bays. It was almost too beautiful to believe. We saw Herons, cockatoos, Kingfishers and many Orchids. In one spot, what used to be the outside wall of a cave had collapsed and fallen away revealing the inside walls. People had used the cave thousands of years ago and we could see some of the paintings that they had done on the walls.

It would be difficult to ask for more. The ship, the crew, the food, the weather, the land, the water and, of course, the diving are all extraordinary. We enjoyed three more spectacular dives today. In addition to the things that we have come to take for granted - gorgeous corral, clouds of beautiful fish, sharks, turtles, etc. - the highlights of today were two Albino Leopard Sharks and two Pygmy Seahorses. Our guide has a remarkable ability to spot these things. We are now leaving Raja Ampat, steaming all night, heading due south to the Banda Sea. The adventure continues.

After steaming all night, we set up off an idyllic little island. The palm trees and white sand beaches made it very inviting. The island is ringed by shallows that end in a steep/dramatic wall that drops off to about 500 meters. There is a sharp point at one end of the island where the current really rips. This makes for challenging diving but, it also attracts loads of life. At the end of our first dive a few of us were floating, waiting to get into the boat when our guide suddenly shouted "go down, go down, go down!" We followed him into the shallows and met a gorgeous 7ft Leopard Shark. At first, I could hardly make it out against the sand. I don't know how our guide spotted it. It came over to check us out and gave us a great view in water of only about 4ft deep.



At night I am sitting on deck after dinner looking out at a full moon and up at a starry sky. Our last dive yesterday was as beautiful as the rest. The amount of spectacularly colorful coral and beautiful fish is astonishing. While the rest of the group toured a village, I went in the water to do some exercises. Every so often, I would be reminded that I was an outsider intruding on other worlds. If I strayed too close to one particular patch of coral, some brave little fish would try to chase me away by nipping at my feet and toes. I admired their spirit and tried to respect their territory.

Next day we started with stretching on the top deck at 6:30 and headed out for our first dive shortly after 7:00. It was a beautiful drift past gorgeous fish and vibrant coral. After that, I had one of my most beautiful swims ever. The sun was shining, the water was like glass and the time flew by. I swam along the edge of a drop off. On one side of me was shallow water with beautiful coral and clouds of fish. On the other side there was nothing but deep blue. I even managed to land on a couple of idyllic little beaches. And then we dived again, along a dramatic wall on the sheltered side of an island. After diving, we headed into an amazingly idyllic maze of tiny islands. We were able to climb to the top of one which gave us a wonderful view of the entire area. Everywhere that I look out here, whether it is above the water or below, seems to be beautiful.

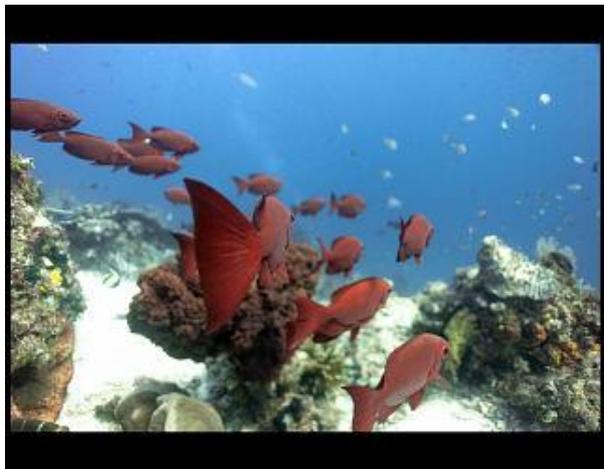
The underwater geography at our first dive in the Spice Islands was breathtaking. Massive peaks, valleys and plateaus. Going from one spire to the next really felt like flying. The creature highlights were eels and a big octopus. The eels looked like Morays but were bigger than I had ever seen and beautifully colored. One that I saw looked like a shiny leopard. Another was dark green but looked like it had been sprinkled with gold dust. Neither looked too pleased to have me on their turf. The octopus was the biggest that I have seen.



The following morning we visited the town of Banda Neira. It is a charmingly sleepy backwater with some broken down reminders of its more eventful past. We visited the old Dutch fort, an old Nutmeg plantation and the various markets. Because very few tourists come to this place, the locals simply smile and walk on. In the afternoon, we did two beautiful dives in the place where the lava flowed into the ocean from the volcano eruption in 1988. It is already covered with beautiful hard corral. Again, the highlight was exotic eels, with one that was massive.

As you might expect, we had another beautiful day in the Banda Islands. Although there were fewer fish on our dives at Pulau Run, the underwater geography, the corral and the colors were spectacular. In the late afternoon, we all headed in to that island for a little beach party as the sun was going down. It was lovely. One of the folks on our trip has been using a GoPro to video most of our dives. It is amazing to see the images that she is able to capture. She edited some of them together into a short film that she shared with us tonight. It was outstanding.





And then, our last full day on board! It really has been an extraordinary trip. I do not know what more we could have asked for. The weather, the water, the sea life, the shore excursions, the ship and, most importantly, the crew were all amazing. All of the folks from the Seven Seas have been wonderful. The Captain runs a tight ship but, he manages to keep his team happy, upbeat and motivated. He meets us at the top of the stairs after every dive and he pitches in with whatever needs to be done - carrying tanks, moving equipment, mopping up rain, etc. He sets a great example for everyone else. Our Leader Karl has been outstanding. He is smart, experienced, patient and always helpful. He has the perfect demeanor for his job - upbeat and completely unflappable. He manages to keep his team motivated and the guests happy. It is a difficult job but, somehow he makes it look easy. The Dive Masters kept the group together safely in some very challenging conditions. They are incredibly good at spotting things and added a tremendous amount to our experience.

Since we are flying early tomorrow morning, most people only did one dive today. We are at an island named Nusa Laut. There appear to be quite a few people living on the island so I was worried that the reef might be fished out. Apparently, for the last several years, the local folks have been working to preserve the marine environment. Their efforts show results. The water is beautifully clear, the coral looks very healthy and there are lots of fish including some big ones - a gorgeous Tuna that must have weighed 70lbs. The area was so beautiful that some of us went back to snorkel after the dive. And then we are on our way to Ambon for disembarkation tomorrow. We leave for the airport at 6:00am. All that is left now is for us to pack up our gear and get home. But, I know that we will all be taking many extraordinarily memories with us that will last a lifetime.

Thank you Seven Seas!

David Gibb,
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