

Scuba Diving in Flores and Alor, Indonesia

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRANDON COLE - DECEMBER 22, 2015



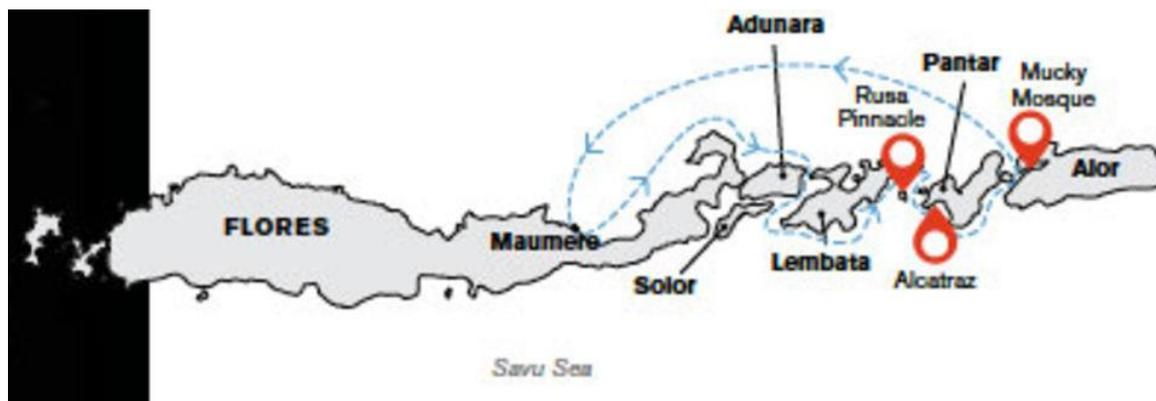
A stunning display of colorful invertebrate life at Tanjung Lusitobo on Lembata.

I love fish soup. Not the dish but rather the experience. Like this dive at Watu Balu in seas positively boiling with life.

Scales of a million fish swirl about me — fusiliers flashing sleek sides, surgeonfish gliding by in perfect formation, waves of anthias frenetically feeding on plankton in the formidable current, which carries me over terraced table corals and past boulders smothered with orange soft corals. Trevallies and tuna charge in from the blue to ambush prey, each attack causing the harried masses to scatter momentarily. A strong surge pushes and pulls and spins me through the melee. Although photos are hard to come by on this wild and woolly ride, I'm loving it.

I had never heard of Watu Balu, nor many of the other sites we've dived during the past week. Adrift somewhere in Indonesia's East Nusa Tenggara, we're way off the radar. The liveboards operating here call it the East of Flores itinerary: Starting in Maumere, on the island of Flores, and working east to the Alor archipelago, we dive the islands of Flores, Adunara, Lembata, Pantar, Alor and numerous places in between. These islands straddle the Indian and Pacific oceans, and we find cryptic beasties on phenomenal muck dives and cruise along sheer walls and colorful reefs. One morning we wake to a breathtaking 360-degree view of six volcanoes emerging from the sea. One evening we gaze up at the moon to watch thousands of bats flying above us. Another day begins with us diving on the submerged shoulders of Komba, an active volcano erupting every 15 minutes, and ends with us dining under a sky full of stars and Komba's fireworks. We visit the traditional whaling village of Lamalera to meet people still hunting sperm whales with harpoons as they've done for 500 years.

Amazing above and below the waves, East of Flores is an exciting new frontier for adventuresome divers.



A sample route on an East of Flores itinerary.

DIVERS GUIDE TO EAST OF FLORES

Don't-Miss Dives

Alcatraz, Pantar

Throngs of fish stream along a wall covered with crinoids, sponges and black coral bushes. Nearby, a forest of giant burgundy tree soft corals sprouts from the sand in 80 to 100 feet.

Mucky Mosque, Alor

Superb day and night, this steep sand slope in Kalabahi Bay is home to paddleflap rhinopias, wonderpus octopuses, bobtail squid, frogfish and tons of nudibranchs.

Rusa Pinnacle, Rusa

Contend with potentially strong current on this advanced dive in 20 to 100 feet and behold an explosion of fish and invertebrates, including bannerfish, dogtooth tuna, sea fans and purple hydrocorals.

>> **When to Go** Year-round; dry season is May to November; rainy season is December to April

>> **Average Air Temp** 80°F to 90°F

>> **Average Water Temp** 80°F, often with cooler upwellings at southern dive sites in the Savu Sea

>> **Average Viz** 30 to 100 feet >> **Skill level** Dive sites range from novice to advanced, depending on depth and current

>> **Getting There** Fly from Bali to Maumere (MOF) on Flores to board the liveaboard Seven Seas for a 12-night voyage, which includes sailing to Alor and back through both the Indian and Pacific oceans

DIVERS DAY OFF

- **Dolphin- and whale-watching** is the perfect way to off-gas in the middle of a long, dive-intensive trip through East Nusa Tenggara. Spinner and Fraser's dolphins, sperm whales and even the occasional blue whale are seen in Pantar Strait and the deep waters of the Savu Sea. These are important feeding grounds and also key migratory routes for many marine mammal species.

- **On a guided tour of the island of Alor**, visit a local fish and vegetable market in the town of Kalabahi, then the Museum of a Thousand Moko to learn about unique bronze kettledrums and view tenun ikat hand-woven tapestries.

- **The highlight for many divers will be a trip into the highlands to the village of the Aboi hill tribe.** Headhunters in the not-so-distant past, the Aboi now welcome guests and are proud to share their culture through traditional song and dance. If you're feeling especially brave, join them in chewing betel nut.

- **On Flores, hike around the rim of Mount Kelimutu volcano.** From 5,377 feet above sea level you'll enjoy striking views of a trio of colored lakes nestled in its crater. These unique lakes change color as a result of chemical reactions. The three lakes vary in color from one another, and each one changes colors irregularly — in varying shades of blue, teal, green and red.