



## Under the Volcano - Diving in East of Flores

*Trip Report by Tony Pigott.*

Kumba is an uninhabited Volcanic island ten miles north of the island of Alor in the Suva sea of eastern Indonesia. We are moored 100 metres off shore on The Seven Seas, an 80ft Sulawesi styled wooden Trader waiting for Kumba to erupt. For the past ten days a dozen fanatic scuba divers have been sailing through the archipelago east of the island of Flores exploring the minute and the magnificent. The profusion of sea creatures and coral has been described as the Amazon Rainforest of the Ocean; a stretch of sea from Bali to Papua New Guinea that holds the greatest Ocean biodiversity on the planet.



This slice of ocean is the exclusive habitat for thousands of the world's most bizarre creatures and a magnet for marine photographers. Half the divers aboard are globetrotting photo hunters armed with massive cameras tricked out with handle bars and strobe lights with enough BTU's to daze a hammerhead. Three times a day and once most evenings we all drop quietly into the depths in search of the rare, the extraordinary, perhaps the undiscovered. So far, the biggest find has turned out to be very small. Hovering between two rocks 45 feet down on the sloping shore of Kalabahi Bay, within shouting distance of the town Mosque was Rhinopoma eschmeyerii. It is spiky pink, five inches long with the random contours of something you have spilled on the floor. They claim it's a fish.

When our laser eyed dive leader spotted Rhino he banged away on his air tank triggering a mad rush of underwater paparazzi.



But for the average divers on board everything is Rhino exciting. You soar with the surging current drifting past massive walls of extraterrestrial coral formations, waving fields of Anemones and schools of thousands of rare little beauties with apt names like the silver striped convict blennies and juvenile sweet lips. Yes there is the occasional shark and plenty of large eels but somehow in the garden of Indonesian Eden, you bask in the naïve sensation that everyone gets along.

But below the surface is not the only fascinating world to be discovered. A maze of islands and long channels, volcanos and massive escarpments is home to a patchwork of ethnicities and religions that trade and conflict have brought here over millennia. We land at the whaling village of Lamelera. Painted long boats are poised at the top of the beach waiting for a sighting. Whale meat and slabs of blubber are hanging out to dry on dozens of make shift racks. The skeletons of three sperm whales killed days before, bob up and down just off shore. Whaling and Catholicism arrived here with the Portuguese 400 years ago. Today on the same beach is a beautiful blue and white shrine sheltering a statue of Christ holding a harpoon.





Days later at dawn we approach the towering, deep green island of Pantar. A hundred dug out float by us without a sound, a tranquil rush hour with each man setting his nets, the tidal current sliding them down the straight. Small villages are built up along the shores edge or up the mountain face each declaring their beliefs with the dome of a mosque or a tin roofed Lutheran Steeple visible above the tree tops. When we anchor a long boat heads out from one of the villages and grapples along side. Six women display their weavings in the breeze; a bobbing retail pop up of intricate IKAT designs that are absurdly underpriced. Later, on shore we tour through the large and noisy town of Katabani in a banged up mini bus. In the town market, amid the riot of produce, spices, cuttle fish and bike parts we see more Ikat from surrounding villages, each with its own signature design all the result of hand looms introduced by the Dutch centuries ago. On Katabani's one main road, schools of whining motorbikes flow up and down while boys and girls in perfect uniforms, wave and shout out on their way to class. Our guide, wearing a light blue hijab points proudly to the neighbourhood demarcations; the main mosque, the Catholic Cathedral, the big Chinese general store, the protestant high school. Separate but peaceable she says. We are not Molucca.

Our last dives are at the foot of Kumba that rises 2 500 ft straight out of mid ocean. The west face has a dark grey scar of lava rock running from the volcano's crater to the waters edge. As we set anchor for our first dive, Kumba erupts with a deep and impressive thud and a thick ash cloud rises slowly above the island. It lets loose about every hour, insuring for now at least, that things don't build up to something more explosive.

Tony Pigott

