



Today's Special: Spicy Fish By Jeanne Liebetrau and Peter Pinnock



'The Spice Islands' is a name that prompts the imagination to think of delectable cuisine from exotic menus accompanied by delicious odours wafting through a restaurant overlooking an azure blue sea.



Asian Diver

Reality is that the Spice Islands are nothing like that at all. Once the most coveted islands in the world, over which battles and blood was shed, the 10 islands making up the group are now scraps of prime real estate in a distant corner of eastern Indonesia.

In 1511 the adventurous Portuguese discovered the Banda Islands (their real name), the only place at the time where nutmeg and cloves were grown. Nutmeg and mace, the bright red aril of the nut, were used to flavour food fit for kings and queens. The stringent piquancy of cloves were also used to enhance food but more to improve the taste of badly preserved meat to make it more palatable. A rather insane use was clove potion that was believed to extinguish a lover's anguish. It was probably the mild anesthetic and tingling sensation on the mouth that made the only effects. Nevertheless these spices were once considered worth their weight in gold.



The Portuguese monopoly of the spice trade ended in 1599 when the Dutch arrived and the real fight for the islands began. Two years later the British East Indian Company arrived, followed shortly by the Spanish in 1606. The interest in the islands waned once cloves and nutmeg were successfully cultivated elsewhere in the world. The Spice Islands were mostly forgotten. Interestingly it was in the Treaty of Breda



1667, where the English, who weren't keen on war, agreed to relinquish the Spice Islands in exchange for the Dutch held Island of Manhattan.

The Sevenseas liveaboard cruises through these islands leaving from Ambon, the traffic hub of the Maluku's, through Misool, the centre of biodiversity, to Sarong, the logging hub of the remote province

of Papua. The Bandas lie 160km south east of Ambon. It's an overnight trip to the first stop, Nusa Laut, an island located at the south-eastern tip of Maluku. Calm clean water beckoned this weary traveller to get submerged.

First impressions last - in this case it was the variety of prolific hard corals in the shallow waters inhabited by schools of dancing purple anthias, brilliantly coloured coral trout scurrying between the coral heads, neon blue cleaner wrasse waiting for customers, mantis shrimps scurrying into reef holes, sunshine yellow crinoids gripping onto the last promontory of seafans and an infinite number of reef fish moving through the shallow waters. It may be a check-out dive but it has all the elements of a healthy Pacific reef.



Suanggi Island is reached after the 2nd overnight leg. This densely forested small island is populated by thousands of frigatebirds. Overhead the sky is speckled with screeching birds as they soar around the island peak. Below the reef plateau is carpeted in muted coloured leather corals and banks of hard corals. On the edge of the drop-off blue tube sponges shaped like organ pipes extend beyond the reef. An endless passage of fish seemed to be

heading towards the indigo blue depths enticing me to follow, but sanity prevailed - the best reef is in the first 10 meters.

Closer to the Banda Islands is the uninhabitable volcanic island of Bata Kapal. It is sometimes referred to as 'Ship Rock' because of its shape and the wake made by



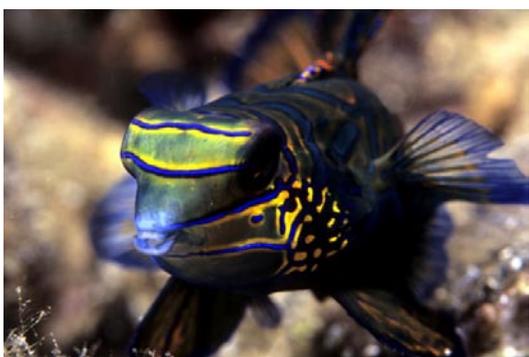
currents as they hit the island. Four submerged sea mounds are interconnected by saddles. It is here that currents emanating from the Banda Sea, the deepest in Indonesia, collide. As the different temperatures mix the visibility becomes fuzzy. The fish don't have a problem - they are all present feeding on the torrent of nutrients. Fusiliers, surgeonfish and thousands of pyramid butterflyfish pepper the water as they take advantage of the food feast. Just off the reef a team of dog-tooth tuna patrols with intention

to kill. Nervous butterflyfish and fusiliers scatter towards the sanctity of the reef. It has been said that the Banda Islands population of dog-tooth tuna can sustain the islanders' needs without going into decline.



After seeing so many fish we had to visit the islands to find the spices. Banda Neira, the main island, is steeped in history. A visit to the museum gives one an understanding of the spice cultivation and bitter battles over it. Throughout town many of the colonial buildings have been restored, as has the Fort Belgica situated strategically above town with the original cannons aimed to protect the fort. From here there are panoramic views of Banda Neira, Banda Besar and Gunung Api, the active volcano, and of course, nutmeg and clove trees that grow everywhere. Contrary to the saying I saw very few big fish on sale at the market - perhaps I was late but the sight of fish sent me back to the ocean.

Directly in front of the Maulana Hotel, in amongst rocks, rubble, old light bulbs and rotting rags lives a community of giant mandarinfish. These mandarinfish are so big I thought they were on steroids. They exceeded the 6cm max size that is quoted in fish books. I speculated whether this was from the spices or the nearby volcano.



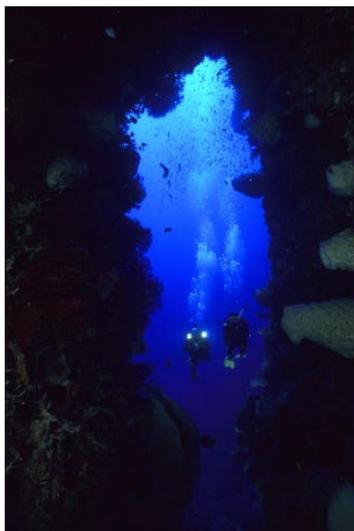


Heading north away from spices but towards more fish are the remote islands of Misool. Seemingly isolated the fish here should have a better chance of survival. This area is known for its unpredictable currents which are the key factor in the astounding statistics of fish and corals found here. Once again first impressions last. In Misool it is the colours of the soft corals that are mind-blowing - blooms of orange, purple, red, yellow, pink, green and white in an outrageous landscape design. Added to that are the multitude of goldies and glassfish that horde around the soft corals. Then there is the noise to contend with -when the current is running there is a clickety-clack of snapping mouths and crustaceans' claws, a whoosh of swarming fish and crackling of coral fronds chafing. The reef is totally alive with activity.

Misool has some really weird shaped reefs. Razor Reef is a series of sharp ledges running the length of the island that jut out at an angle - much like the shape of a pineapple. Bushy hard corals and blossoming soft corals break the harshness of the reef structure. The three holes that pierce through Jamur Boo Island may be easily seen from the surface and easy to pass through underwater but with the current it is not so easy to return as my dive buddy found out! The island was probably once connected to a smaller island 100m away. It is as if someone has taken an angle grinder and sliced vertically through the island to break it up. Large chunks of rock with



sheer sides are spread over the reef. Huge seafans and barrel sponges occupy the shallow valleys in-between. As I ducked into one of these to escape the current I discovered pygmy seahorses living comfortably in the fronds of a seafan. Ferundi's Cave is not quite so unusual but one does swim under an island through the cave to access the reef wall. Further along the wall is a large cave that can be entered from underwater and surface inside to the sounds of bats overhead. I was so engrossed in watching a well nourished banded seasnake in its





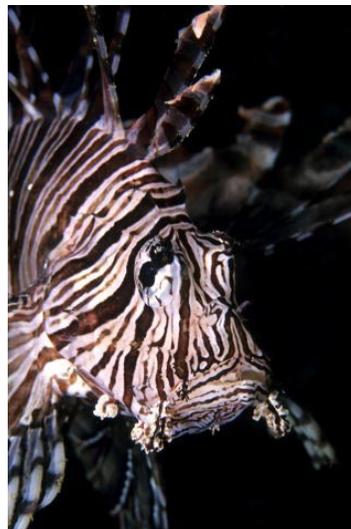
quest for food that I missed the second cave.



Even further north are the islands of Fam. Melissa's Garden can be affected by currents from all directions hence it is rich with soft corals, leather and brain corals. Wobbegong sharks and epaulette sharks often rest in the shelter created by the coral heads. When the currents are too strong the island of Kerua is dived. A steep wall on the one side is where the funky orangutan crabs live inside hard corals. The small yellow robust sea cucumbers have colonized this wall. It is also a haven for nudibranchs and starfish. A slit in the wall is where a family of lionfish work together to trap errant glassfish. Their gluttony reminded me that it was dinner time.



That night the Sevensesas served batter-fried fish for dinner. I grated some fresh nutmeg over and contemplated the combination of spice and fish - yes - it is a good combination.



Travel Contact: www.thesevensesas.net

To view a gallery of pictures from the Banda Islands visit:

<http://www.PeterPinnock.com/gallery.asp?galleryname=banda>

For more underwater images and stories visit <http://www.PeterPinnock.com>