

Alor - East of Flores

For selected cruises during the year the Komodo Dancer will be setting out on dive adventure programmes "East of Flores" to Alor. Crystal clear visibility, exciting drifts along sheer walls, dazzling coral gardens and some magnificent muck dives combine to house one of the most prolific and diverse marine ecosystems on earth. Here is the story of the start of a brand new destination for Peter Hughes Diving and the Komodo Dancer.



The island of Pura in the Alor/Pantar Strait at sunset

A New Destination

Life is full of surprises, particularly where scuba diving is concerned, and we had a really big one last year when the Alor regency in eastern Indonesia opened its door to us.

In 2008 the Dancer Fleet's operators in Indonesia launched a brand new luxury liveboard, the Paradise Dancer. This impressive vessel immediately won acclaim not only for her wonderful style and facilities but also for the two outstanding but strikingly different destinations

that she dives and cruises - North Sulawesi and Raja Ampat. Visiting two destinations during an operational year has given Peter Hughes Diving clients even more variety when selecting a dive destination. With this in mind we decided to repeat the exercise with our other Indonesian based vessel the Komodo Dancer and started to look at new and relatively undiscovered regions of the countries' vast archipelago to visit. The search was easy, all we had to do was look in our dive logs.

Back in 2004 we had a break in our regular Bali-Komodo schedule and took a custom cruise that pushed even further east visiting the chain of islands between Flores and Alor, deep into what is called East Nusa Tenggara. What we found astonished us; endless visibility over pristine reefs teeming with marine life and fascinating critter dives loaded with all the rare creatures underwater photographers only dream about. To go with our marine adventures there was breathtaking topside scenery featuring active volcanoes, breaching whales and leaping dolphins along with the wonderfully friendly local people diving into the water alongside us - and this was only one trip! We had always wanted to find out more and so our quest to find a new dive destination for the Komodo Dancer was over relatively quickly; it was staring us in the face.

Location

The Flores/Adonara/Lembata/Pantar/Alor islands of Indonesia lie toward the end of the Nusa Tenggara archipelago, 160 nautical miles directly south of the large island of Sulawesi and 500 nautical miles east of Bali. Most of this huge island chain is about eight degrees below the equator and enjoys calm seas and warm sunny weather throughout most of the year.

The different areas that we operate in around



The sparkling reef top at Babylon, south Ternate (video still)

Indonesia each have a distinctive feel to them, both underwater and on the surface. The architecture of the reefs and the corals living on them appear to be very slightly different in each area, marine life that is common in one place is rarely seen in others, and our Flores to Alor route is no exception. The marine environments along our route include sheer fan covered walls, teeming sea mounts and ledges with spectacular visibility, sparkling kaleidoscopic coral slopes and some remarkable sandy critter dives. Some dives are totally unique, such as Clown Valley and Big Foot Bay in the Alor/Pantar Strait, with carpets of anemones spreading as far as the eye can see.



A Paddleflap Rhinopus on the gravel at Beangabang Bay (video still)

It was therefore with some excitement that in October 2008 we started out on what was to become some fascinating new dive cruises that revisited the eastern end of the Nusa Tenggara archipelago. Some of the areas and dive sites we already had knowledge of but we had our work cut out to find more - and what discoveries we made! It takes a little while to get really comfortable with a new operational area but our experience in Komodo, Raja Ampat and North Sulawesi stood us in good stead and right away we started for find some sublime new sites to go along with what we already knew.

We are now at the end of our second season in the region and our list of sites and the marine life found on them just keeps on getting longer - and more impressive.



One of a pair of what we think were Fin Whales diving at Pura (video still)

Big Stuff

Large animals turn up in the Alor/Pantar Strait that are rarely seen in other destinations; Mola Mola, Thresher and Hammerhead Sharks and absolutely huge Dogtooth Tuna. On other dives along our northern route we are often visited by massive Napoleon Wrasse, plenty of Whitetip, Blacktip and Grey Reefsharks, colossal Black Blotched Stingrays as well as squadrons of Eagle and Mobular Rays.

Huge schools of Dolphins are a common sight on our travels as they race towards to boat to play in our bow wave. The channels that separate the islands serve as a major thoroughfare for much larger cetaceans too and it is not unusual to see one or two huge whales surfacing to breath, even the massive Blue and Fin varieties.

Small Stuff

Most avid critter divers know of the Lembah Strait in Sulawesi but not many have heard of the Kalabahi Sound, Teluk Lebaleba, Teluk Waihinga or Beangabang Bay - all of which are on a par with their more famous cousin. These areas produce rare and cryptic creatures time and time again, without the crowds or overzealous divemasters moving the marine life around - and we have only really scratched the surface, or bottom if you want to be technically correct.

To produce a world class critter site conditions must be right; slightly sloping sandy gravel and silt

is the preferred bottom composition, washed over daily by a gentle tidal current and preferably mixed with a fresh water outflow such as a stream or river. When these environments combine then things start to get interesting, and there are plenty of opportunities to find them in the hundreds of bays and coves that are a feature of the islands.



Komba volcano blowing it's top

Topside

Along our route there are some incredible topside sights too - white sandy beaches, sparkling blue seas, emerald green forests, scorched savannah and more strikingly - many active volcanoes. Earlier this year we decided to visit one of these fire breathing monsters located out in the ocean and were once again surprised. Creeping up on the smoke puffing beast before first light gave us the awesome sight of molten lava flowing down the mountainside into the sea punctuated by

thunderous bangs blasting out clouds of dust from deep inside the island - so of course we decided to dive there and found even more fascinating but very different sites to add to our list.

The Local People

Although not densely populated we often get to meet the people of this far flung region, their smiling friendly faces making a welcome addition to any trip. The ladies from the islands of the Alor/Pantar Strait specialise in decorative Ikat fabrics and will brave the currents and row in their precarious water craft out for us to sample and buy their colourful weaves. If you like live entertainment don't worry there is plenty of that too, we often roll up to a dive site to be greeted by an entire school of children singing and shouting to us from the shore or paddling in their dugout canoes around the boat.

The quality of the coral reefs of the Strait owe a lot to the local fishermen. Sustainable fishing practices using basket weave traps are in place and it is not unusual to see a spear fisherman going about his aquatic business whilst completing a safety stop after a dive, they love to pose for underwater photographs too.

The Komodo Dancer and her experienced crew has now put East Flores and the Alor area firmly on the map of must see places for divers wanting to experience something exciting, new and out of the ordinary. For pioneering diving off the beaten track the underwater world of Alor is hard to beat!

Surprise yourself - we did!



The Ikat ladies of Buaya plying their trade

