

Spice odyssey

A trip to Indonesia's Banda Islands feels like falling off the edge of the known world, writes *Sophy Roberts*

The creature circling our stern unnerves me: the wide, flattened head, its skin a pale steel colour with a pronounced dorsal fin that cuts a menacing profile. Wouter van den Houten, our skipper and dive-master, slows the boat and slips into the ocean with snorkel and mask. For a while he and the whale shark play with each other, the gentlest and largest of the shark species running its belly against his chest. I keep my distance, wary of the inquisitive stare, the tautness of its lightly spotted flesh, the way it wants to somehow understand who we are as our eyes meet through a shaft of sunlight cutting through the open water.

This curious encounter with one of the world's more elusive animals occurs just two hours into our journey across the Banda Sea in eastern Indonesia. We're making the 17-hour crossing from Ambon, the regional capital of Maluku province, troubled by sectarian violence and closed to outsiders from 1999 to 2002, to a tiny archipelago known as the Bandas.

According to Tanya Alwi, daughter of Des Alwi, the late King of Banda, the islands see fewer than 30 visitors a month. They include the likes of Amanresorts founder Adrian Zecha, who has been sniffing around for a possible hotel site, but most are committed divers, including two Austral-

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ians we meet who were prepared to spend six days of their two-week vacation trying to get to the islands by unreliable public transport (in the end they stole a ride on a visiting dignitary's boat). But then the alternative to such opportunistic hitching is a great deal more expensive: cruising the Bandas by private charter.

I'm sailing on Tiger Blue, a 34m-long, 10-berth teak and ironwood motorsailer (a traditional eight-sailed Indonesian *phinisi*) brought up from Bali. Van den Houten, 46, commissioned her in the boatyards of Sulawesi, and even selected the tree from the jungle used to make this red-sailed beauty's 18m-long keel.

The Bandas, like a whale shark, are unsettling on paper. They're a very long way from anywhere, difficult to find on a map, the islands a brooding rupture in the so-called Ring of Fire dominated by a spirited volcano. Blowing every 80 years or so, Gunung Api rises 600m out of the water in a perfect jungle-covered cone. Like something from *Land of the Lost*, the peak is misted with cloud. Anchored



Clockwise from top: the Tiger Blue has air-conditioned cabins; the Gunung Api volcano; sunloungers on the boat's deck; snorkellers get close to a whale shark Corbis; Alamy

at its feet, I listen to haunting calls echo across the water – fruit pigeon, I'm told, though they conjure images of pterodactyl. Then morning comes and a local *kora-kora* – a traditional canoe rowed by 25 men – emerges from behind the volcano. Even though they are pre-booked warriors summoned for our benefit, it's still atmospheric, especially when the heavens open in a tropical storm, the onslaught of rain muffling out the birds and killing a butterfly, which falls at my feet.

It's this fragile exoticism – a butterfly the size of my palm murdered by a raindrop – that makes one feel as if one has tipped off the edge of the known world. If something does go wrong, there's little by way of support: a few irregular ferries that make the crossing from Ambon, and a small airstrip on Bandanaira, the main island, inconsistently serviced by a domestic Indonesian airline. But otherwise nothing aside from a resilient local population of fishermen and nutmeg farmers inhabiting seven of the 10 islands, which are a five-hour-flight from Jakarta, 600 nautical miles from Australia. We see more sperm whales in our crossing of the Banda Sea than pilot lights from other boats.

Thank God, therefore, for the reassuring luxuries of Tiger Blue. The first time I sailed the Indonesian archipelago, I hopped around Kalimantan, Sulawesi and Java on groaning passenger vessels carrying many more people than legal (on one three-night journey I remember sleeping on deck beside the lifeboat; the safety record, stuck to the boat's side, was five years out of date). Tiger Blue, on the other hand, has van den Houten – a likeable, easy-going host with 12



years' experience in Indonesia, and more than 4,000 dives under his belt. He also has a satellite phone.

Our air-conditioned cabins – double beds, en-suite bathrooms – have a simple style, reading lights and hot water showers. Warm towels greet us every time we come in from a snorkel, cold towels when we return from a hike, while the eight staff consistently deliver the polish that Van den Houten, for all his soft-spoken approach, clearly expects (when I can't find my sunglasses, one of the Balinese staff gently tells me they're in my handbag). Unlike some other live-aboard boats with built-up superstructures to accommodate guests, Tiger Blue's deck has plenty of room to spread out in the sun or shade with beanbags and loungers. Diversions include wakeboarding and waterskiing, and there's even a flatscreen television for watching *Blue Planet*. Thus Tiger Blue nails the sybaritic part of the experience, and at a cost at least 30 per cent less than some of its competitors, among them Amanresorts' Amanika, Silolona, its new sister Si

Datu Bua, and the boat launching in December from Alila Hotels and Resorts, Alila Purnama. At \$500 per person per day all-in – food, drink, diving, land-based excursions (assuming a group of 10 has chartered the boat) – Tiger Blue is relatively good value, the final bill not far off taking a family to one of Bali's top hotels.

For my part, I cannot think of a more relaxing, effective way to access the deep texture of Indonesia, both above and under water. To do it any cheaper, I'd be on a dive boat with people I don't know, spending more time on better-visited reefs than getting out there in the Bandas' nutmeg groves that feature on few itineraries. This is because trips to these islands are only really sold in the small seasonal window when the dive charters transfer from the Komodo region, popular from May to September, to Raja Ampat off West Papua, from October to March.

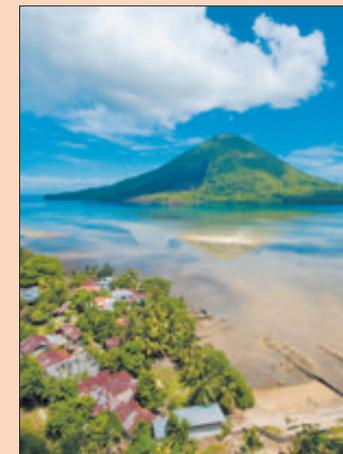
Yet the far-flung Bandas are worthy of more than being an occasional stop-off for boats "repositioning" between seasons, and to my mind outshine the

more popular islands of Sumba and Komodo. Ten years ago, aboard a private charter, there was no one but us moored off Komodo's Pink Beach. Now as many as six boats can be seen in high season. In the Bandas, however, we see just one other vessel, Damai, while diving off Devil's Island, a waterless rock where prisoners were dumped to die during the 17th century spice wars. When I snorkel along the drop-off, the reef is so black with surgeonfish it's almost as if a school of manta rays has taken out the light.

The white sand beaches, that dense cloak of green vegetation falling off vast volcanic cliffs, sea caves like basilicas crowded with bats – all of this is compelling, but it's the history of nutmeg that gets me in the end.

This shrivelled nut encased in a crimson web of mace, which in its turn is protected by a yellowish fruit the size of a plump apricot, was once prized by 16th-century Europeans as a cure-all, especially to ward off the plague. As a result, the Banda Islands, as the original natural habitat of the spice, was caught up in more than a century of war, genocide and unimaginable trade, which on the wharves of London and Amsterdam saw nutmeg commanding a mark-up of up to 60,000 per cent from source to point of sale.

When you look at maps of the period, the Bandas' size tends to be exaggerated. The islands comprise just 40 square miles of landmass, yet during the time of King James I, two of



the smallest Bandas were considered significant enough to join the royal title, "James, I, King of Scotland, England, Wales, Ai and Run". In 1667, the British swapped the last of those strongholds – Run, measuring no more than three by two kilometres – with the Dutch for the island of Manhattan.

I'm not so sure it was that great a deal. I'd rather a reef busier with triggerfish than the Westside Highway at 5pm. I'd rather hear tales of the ghosts of Belgica Fort – one of the most chilling places I've visited – than spend an afternoon at the Metropolitan Museum. I like looking for musket shot and 18th-century coins, sifting my fingers through sand among forgotten ruins, their walls overgrown with scrambling vines and the nests of colourful birds. I learn how, in the late 19th century, a Bandanese trader, Bin Saleh Baadilla, supplied fashionable Europe with feathers for expensive hats – some 50,000 skins a year.

Our taste for the exotic changes, of course, but right now, in an over-travelled, over-connected world, I'd wager a journey on Tiger Blue to the Banda Islands has it pretty much nailed.

Details

Sophy Roberts travelled as a guest of Tiger Blue (www.tigerblue.info) and Ampersand Travel (www.ampersandtravel.com). A seven-night trip, with five nights on board, costs from £2,598 per person (based on a group of at least seven), including flights from Jakarta to Ambon, full board, guides, shore excursions, diving and other activities

