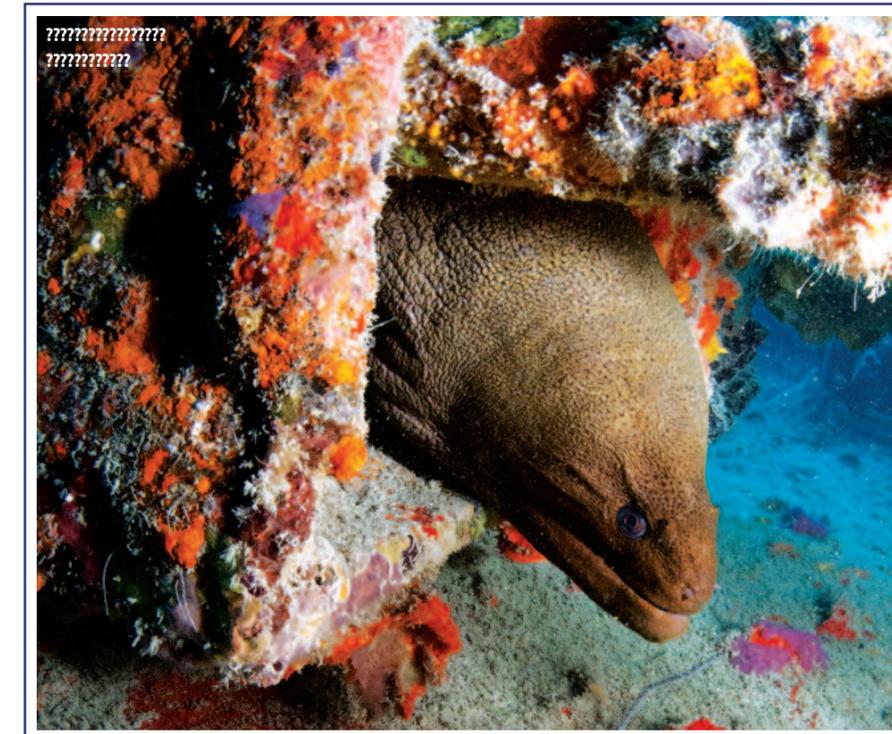




Nick and Caroline Robertson-Brown of Frogfish Photography embark on an epic month-long trip around Indonesia's diving hotspots, stopping off first at Pramuka Island, Jakarta

Photographs by **FROGFISH PHOTOGRAPHY**



An Indonesian ODYSSEY

Frogfish Photography has recently returned from a month-long expedition to Indonesia that took in the diving at four destinations of the 17,500 islands that make up this diving mecca. We went there to discover some of the lesser-known dive sites, to experience some of the most-diverse diving to be had in one country, and to escort a group of budding underwater photographers on a photo workshop. Our Indonesian adventure was to last over four weeks and we will tell our story over the next few months in Sport Diver.

Bonnie Jackson, from Equator Diving (www.equatordiving.com) set up the trip for us and organised all of our accommodation, diving, internal flights and the group trip. Bonnie is Indonesian, and a passionate diver herself. Importantly, she was able to navigate the local airline booking procedures that can be a bit difficult, and also get the best deals and schedules.

Often the first port to enter Indonesia is Jakarta. Who knows that you can do some diving there? So, as a warm-up, Bonnie arranged for us to dive with a local dive club based in Jakarta. We spent a long weekend diving Pramuka Island, part of the Thousand Island chain in Jakarta Bay. We then fell in love with Ambon,

where there is some of the most-amazing muck diving in the world. Our next stop was Kri in Raja Ampat, where we met up with 15 Frogfish Photography club members for fabulous diving with huge schools of fish and wonderful reefs. Our final destination was to be Bali, where we travelled the island with our own personal local dive guide, who took us to some of the very best and least-known dive sites. There is so much to write about that we will have to break the trip up into smaller, bite-size chunks to describe the journey in more detail.

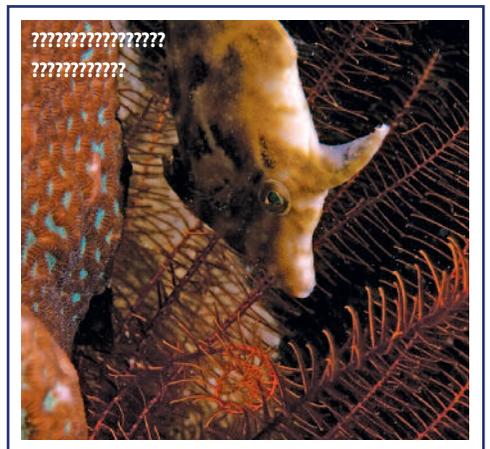
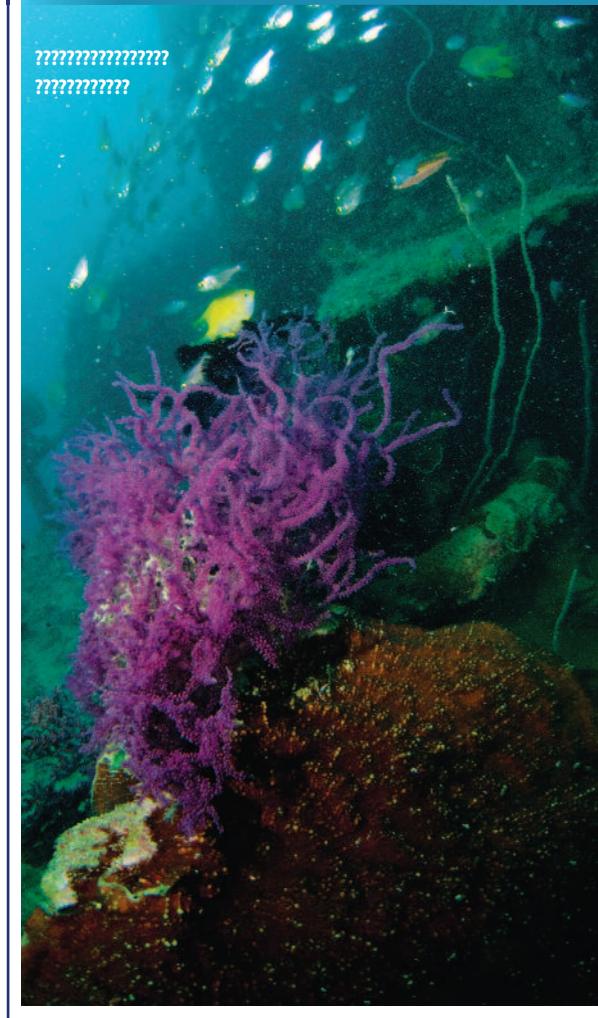
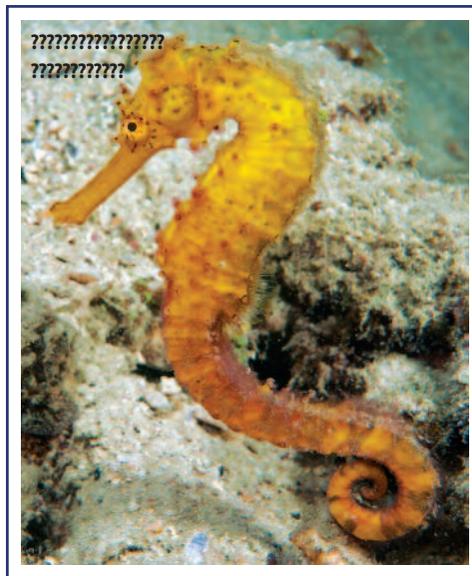
Indonesia is made up of over 17,500 islands which straddle the equator. Its seas are known to be included in the most diverse on the planet, and there is something for every type of diver here, whether you like looking for the weird and wonderful creatures muck diving, cruising along pristine reefs or exploring historical wrecks sitting on the seabed from war and accident alike. Untouched reefs offer us the best soft and hard corals you can imagine, and there are special dives where you can encounter mantas and mola mola. Wallace, a British naturalist, discovered the richness in biodiversity in this region in the 19th century and concluded that this incredible mix of species from Asia and Australasia occurred





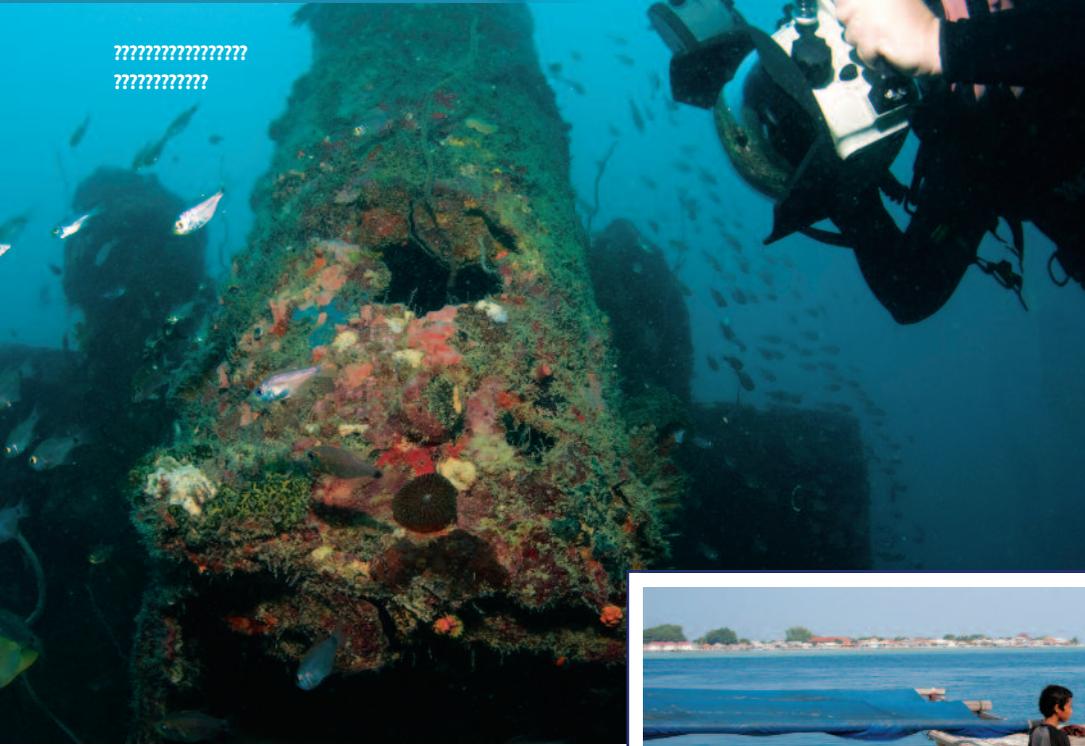
“Any diver flying to Indonesia and wanting a short weekend break to do something completely different, try diving here”

only along a line, which is now known as the ‘Wallace Line’.
Our first stop was Jakarta, and having flown from Manchester on an Emirates A380, we arrived relatively refreshed and ready for our first adventure. We met with Andrew and Melvina from Jakarta Ocean Dive (www.jakartaoceandive.com), who took us down to the docks to meet a small group of seven enthusiastic compact camera users from his club. They had hired a speedboat to take them to Pramuka Island (which translates as Boy Scout Island) for a long weekend of diving. The journey took 90 minutes, passing some of the other islands in the Thousand Island chain just outside Jakarta Bay. Sometimes you just know when you are going to enjoy a trip, and this was one of those moments. Arriving on this tiny island made us realise that this was not a tourist destination, but a place that locals went for their holidays - there were no big hotels

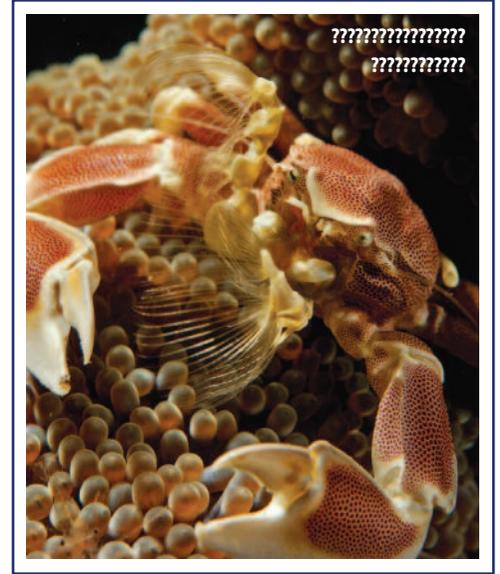


or chain food outlets to be seen. The small harbour was teeming with local boats, and it was very busy due to a national religious holiday. Refreshingly, we were the only non-locals for our whole three-day stay. Our bags were pulled through the stony streets on a cart piled high with camera and diving gear to a small hotel just a few minutes walk from the beach (all the beachfront accommodation had been booked up for the long weekend). It was basic accommodation, without some of the mod-cons we sometimes expect - there was air-con, but it was controlled by the owners, who only ran it between 8pm-9am. Electricity was also in short supply, running only for a





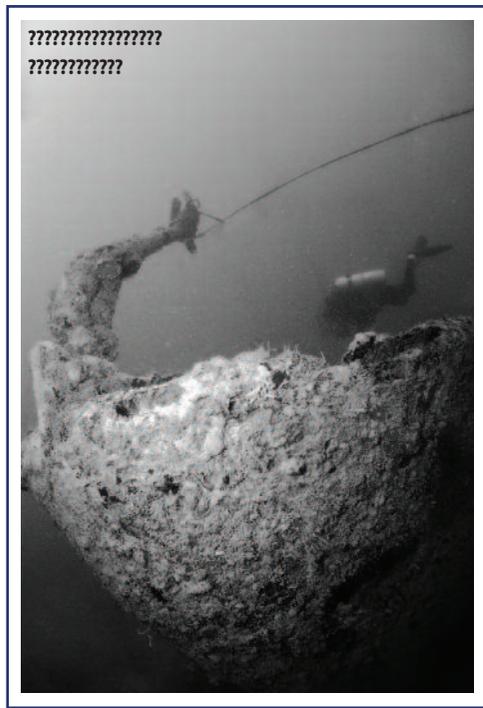
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“We encountered a pair of seahorses, with a very pregnant male, as well as pipefish with eggs”

few hours in the morning and evening, and to get a beer we had to get a ferry to another island altogether! But we were here to experience diving as the locals see it, and it was a great adventure for us. We managed to do eight dives in our short stay on Pramuka Island. We were most impressed with the two wrecks that we dived - they would have had a queue of boats lined up full of divers in the UK. The first wreck we dived was the Poso, a tugboat that lies at 30m and sits nicely on its bottom. The second, Tabularasa, is considerably larger and also sits upright in 30m. It was a fisheries training boat - apparently, the training didn't go very well, but



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we really enjoyed the dive. Visibility was only about ten metres and there was current. A bit like the UK, but the water was just a little warmer at 29 degrees C! We also did three reef dives, and although visibility was similar to a UK dive at times, all the usual Indonesian reef species were there to be seen, including pygmy seahorses. The coral was in good condition, but covered in sand due to the rough weather they had before we arrived. The best time to visit the area is April/May, when the visibility is at its best. The three reef sites we visited were Panggang (which means barbecue), Soft Coral and Balik Layar, where we encountered turtles, nudibranchs, eels, and a host of small shrimps and crabs, as well as plenty of schooling fish. The night dive along the busy pier was fantastic. Seahorses and unusual critters lined the pillar legs. We encountered a pair of seahorses, with a very pregnant male, as well as pipefish with eggs. Triggerfish hide among the coral growing on discarded items thrown into the sea. There is a huge amount of life in a small area, so there is no need to stray far. This



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...

Indonesia



Where is it?

Madeira lies off the west coast of Morocco. While part of Portugal, it is an autonomous territory.

How to get there

There are direct flights from the UK to both the Madeira mainland and the smaller island of Porto Santo.

Best time to visit

Madeira's climate is relatively mild all year, though it is worth checking dive centres are open in the cooler seasons.

"We also spied a small shoal of the moodily named bastard grunt"

Entry requirements

A full British passport.

Currency

Euro (€1 =).

Where to eat

There are several cafes in the small town on Santa Cruz, five minutes from Madeira Oceanos.

Where to meet

Funchal's Old Town has a number of bars suitable for a post-dive tipple.

The local brew

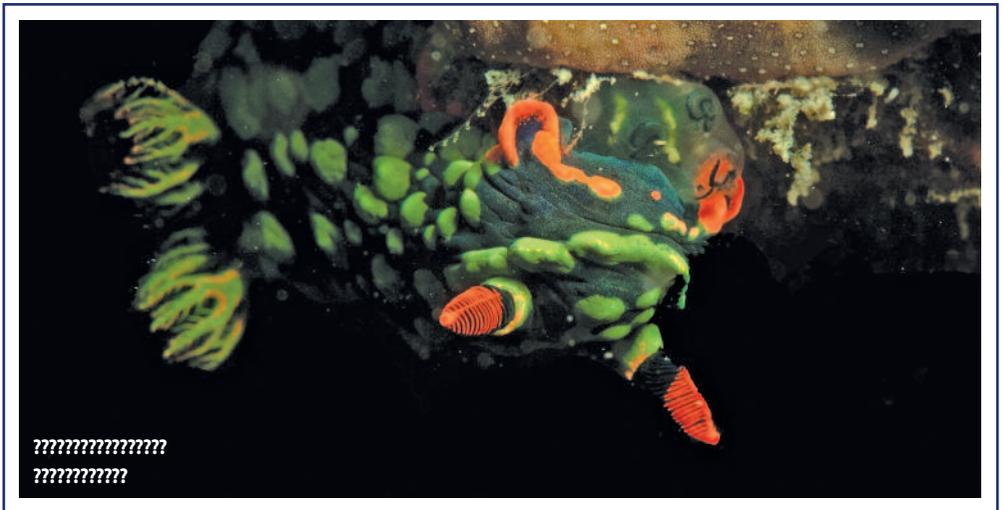
Coral lager.



Just a couple of hours away by plane, Madeira offers a great dive holiday alternative to regular visitors of the Mediterranean.



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is an easy going, shallow night dive with a maximum depth of around 8m. You do have to be careful on ascent as boats operate into the night from this small port, so our dive guide arranged for our dive boat to park above us and watch our bubbles to ensure our route to the surface was clear.

The local food was great, served in a banana leaf and eaten with 'God's spoon'. One night we met up with another local group from Jakarta Ocean Dive, who were there spear-fishing, and they fed not only their own group, but our diving group as well, with two huge trevally they had caught that day. The only restaurant was visited by catching a small local ferry to the fish farm jetty. The Indonesian government is encouraging fish farms, giving grants to stop the practice of dynamite fishing. It is working well. The owner has built a restaurant on the jetty, which served excellent food, even for the vegetarian! The government are also sponsoring reef regeneration schemes around Pramuka to encourage dive tourism. Some have been low-voltage electrified to encourage coral growth. Like the scheme in some Caribbean islands, it works! In return for the amazing hospitality we received over the long weekend, we gave short photo-clinics for those in our group who wanted to improve their photography. They all had compact cameras, with accessories such as wet lenses and strobes, but needed

more guidance on how it all works. Andrew, the owner of the dive club, is himself an excellent underwater photographer and so we are sure the club will go from strength to strength. As the only westerners to be on Pramuka Island, we attracted a lot of attention and happily posed for photographs with passers-by. Our boat had to be pumped free of water continuously as we travelled to dive sites. We never encountered another dive boat, and had a great guide. The weather was glorious. Any diver flying to Indonesia and wanting a short weekend break to do something completely different, try diving here. But, don't go thinking about lounging on a sandy beach sipping cocktails, diving from a huge luxury boat - you will be going local, and it will not be for everyone. This mini-adventure would be ideal as a start for anyone doing ten days in a resort elsewhere in Indonesia. Turn your ten-day holiday into two weeks and sample some 'real Indonesia'. Most flights land in Jakarta, so for three days full board with transfers, the cost with Equator Diving is £350. They will probably be able to arrange your local onward flights too, at local rates, not the tourist ones. We were sad to be heading back to Jakarta, but also very excited about the next part of our Indonesian adventure. Next time we will tell you all about Ambon, probably the best muck diving in the world! ■