

Mucking about in Ambon

Kitting up in the tender, we had no idea what to expect. The water was dark and still. My husband Marcel (a keen underwater photographer) and I were part of a small group about to experience the legendary muck dive site Laha 2 in Ambon Bay.

We had tagged on a couple of days diving in Ambon with Maluku Divers after a great liveaboard trip on the *M/V Archipelago Adventurer II* in the Banda Sea. Deciding to limit ourselves to the muck sites in Ambon Bay, we dived Laha 1, 2 and 3 and also had a wonderful night dive at Silale on the other side of the bay.

Rolling into the water near the brightly painted fishing boats moored to an old jetty, we descended a steep, dark grey rubble slope. A solitary longhorn cowfish hovering nonchalantly at 15 metres was the first life-form to greet us. Then, just three minutes into the dive and barely enough time to adjust our eyes to

"muck diving mode", Nus, one of the superb dive guides at Maluku Divers, spotted our first critter — a camera-shy, rust-coloured thorny seahorse.

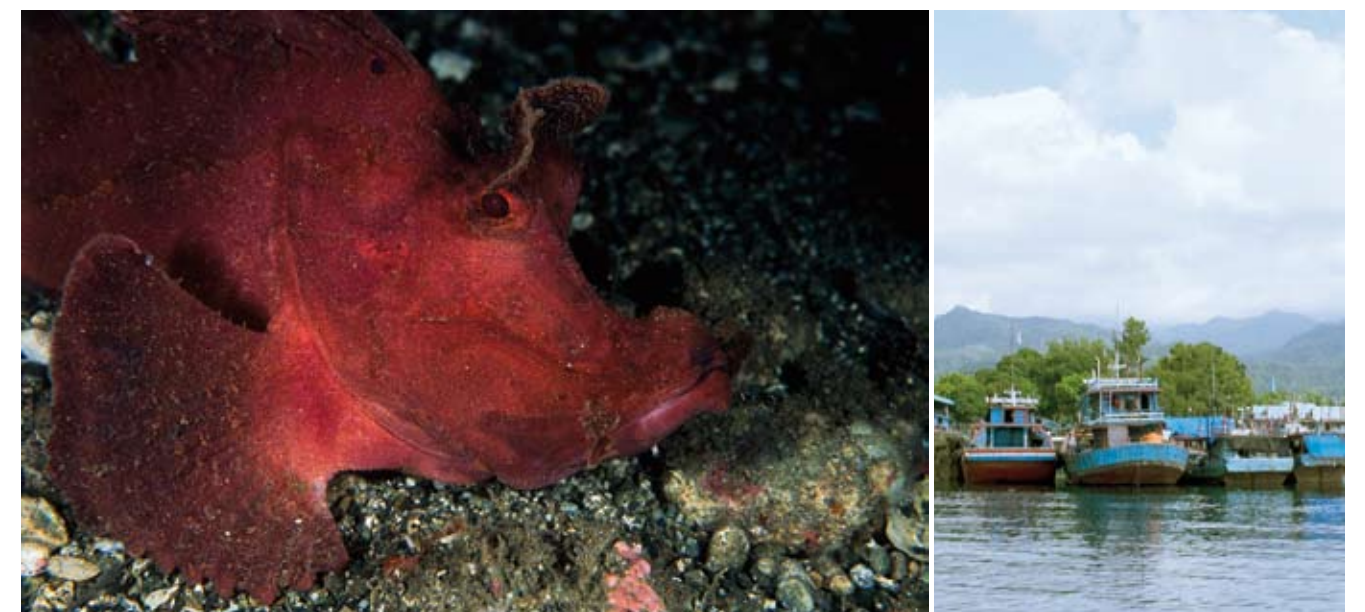
Encouraged by this, we scanned for any movement that might lead us to other interesting finds. Dotting the seabed were fire urchins, which on closer inspection provided protection for zebra crabs or Coleman shrimp, often both. Upon hearing the frantic clanking of our guide's scuba rattle, we wasted no time in locating him. Nus was guarding a motionless wine-coloured *Rhinopias*, a perfect subject for a portrait.

By now, with eyes focused into macro mode, we almost missed a totally unexpected sight. Further up the slope, one of our group managed to get our attention. Silhouetted against the jetty's foundations were eleven mobula rays gliding by in diamond formation. Imagine!

a. Yellow banded pipefish (*Dunckerocampus pessuliferus*) carrying eggs
b. *Nembrotha nudibranch* laying eggs
c. Leaf fish (*Taenianotus triacanthus*) on rubble landscape



a. Motionless wine-coloured *Rhinopias eschmeyeri*
b. Laha jetty in Ambon Bay



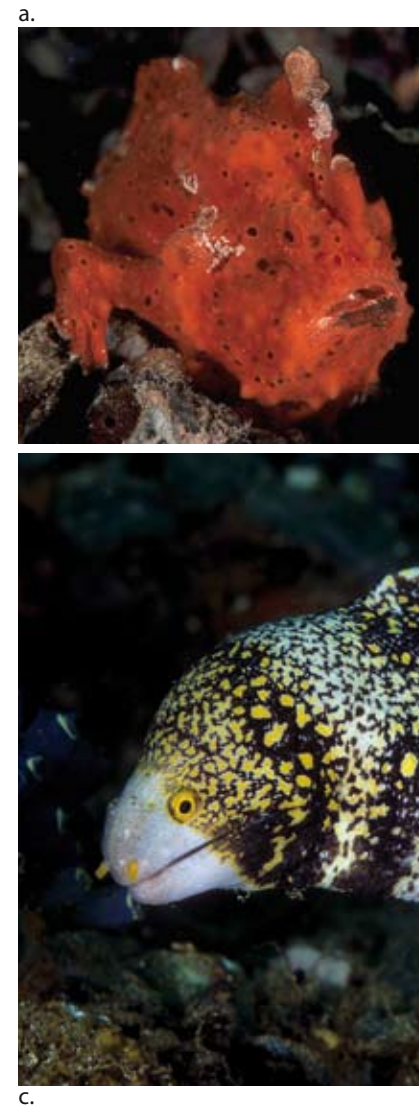
Zebra crab (*Zebrida adamsii*) making itself at home on a fire urchin



a. b.



Deep purple *Rhinopias eschmeyeri* posing on a sandy patch



c.



a. Frogfish (*Antennarius sp.*) pretending to be a sponge
 b. Stargazer buried and concealed in sand, patiently waiting for its next meal
 c. A free-swimming snowflake moray eel (*Echidna nebulosa*)

Resuming our critter hunt, we came across a second *Rhinopias*, this one coloured deep purple, posing on a sandy patch. The landscape subtly changed, with bare sand and rubble giving way to low-growing soft corals and weeds.

Clinging to a small sea fan, a beautiful *Nembrotha* nudibranch laid its eggs. The fight-or-flight mode was evident everywhere. Flying gurnards scuttled away as we approached, while porcupinefish tried to look inconspicuous, and lionfish hid. Other fish seemed unperturbed or even curious about our presence, like the black-saddled tobies and a free-swimming snowflake moray eel.

In the shallows, bathed in warm sunlight, we found ourselves in coral reef terrain. Among the staghorn and plate corals, there was a multicoloured menagerie of angelfish, anthias, damsels, butterflyfish, needlefish, boxfish and the occasional bright-yellow trumpetfish. We ended our dive on a sandy bottom among grazing

goatfish, a pair of cuttlefish, and pipefish almost indistinguishable from floating weeds. What a dive!

Already familiar with other muck dive sites in the region, we were impressed by the intense concentration of species on every dive. Over seven dives, we were lucky enough to encounter a host of critter species including frogfish, stargazers, ornate ghost pipefish and several species of scorpionfish.

Back at Maluku Divers at Latuhalat, we were treated to a sumptuous barbecue in the open-air dining room overlooking the beach. The beautifully renovated cottages were set in spacious grounds shaded by coconut and pandanus trees. We had the honour of being the first guests there.

We barely scratched the surface in our two days in Ambon, so next time we'll be back to explore the dive sites off the north and south peninsulas. We'll also be on a mission to find species we know to be in the bay, such as flamboyant cuttlefish, mimic octopuses and, of course the Ambon scorpionfish. ☺