

# Southern Banda Sea

Text by Simon Pridmore  
Photos by Simon Pridmore  
and Tim Rock

*Off-Piste in the Blue Yonder of Indonesia*





TIM ROCK



Banda Sea

SIMON PRIDMORE

Long-nosed hawkfish in gorgonian (above); Diver with sea fans on steep wall (left); Porcelain crab on coral polyps (previous page)

**The Eastern Indonesian province of Maluku includes the Banda Sea and its multiple archipelagos. This is a region of outstanding natural beauty, which, for centuries, was famed as the centre of the global spice trade, the unique source of much-desired cloves, nutmeg and mace. These days, it is a remote, little-travelled part of the world, and its treasures are mostly found underwater. Simon Pridmore has the story.**

Scuba divers visiting the region today follow in the footsteps of some big names. Ambon, on the northern edge of the Banda Sea, has been a favourite hunting ground for ichthyologists since the 18th century, and Alfred Russel Wallace spent a lot of time here during his 1854–1862 exploration of the region, a period during which he developed his ideas on biogeography and natural selection (independently of Charles Darwin) and came up with the notion of the “Wallace Line” that separates Asia from Australasia.

In recent years, divers have been drawn to Maluku by fabulous

Ambon muck diving, the gorgeous reef scapes and walls of the central islands around historic Banda Neira, and the hammerhead shark schools found in the depths around the largely extinct volcanic plugs of Manuk and Serua at the sea’s eastern rim.

These destinations all feature in a new guide for divers and snorkellers visiting Komodo and Southeast Indonesia, which Tim Rock and I will publish later this year. We have been working on this guide for a long time. It takes many years and many trips to cover every corner of this vast area. In the beginning, we concentrated our efforts on the more



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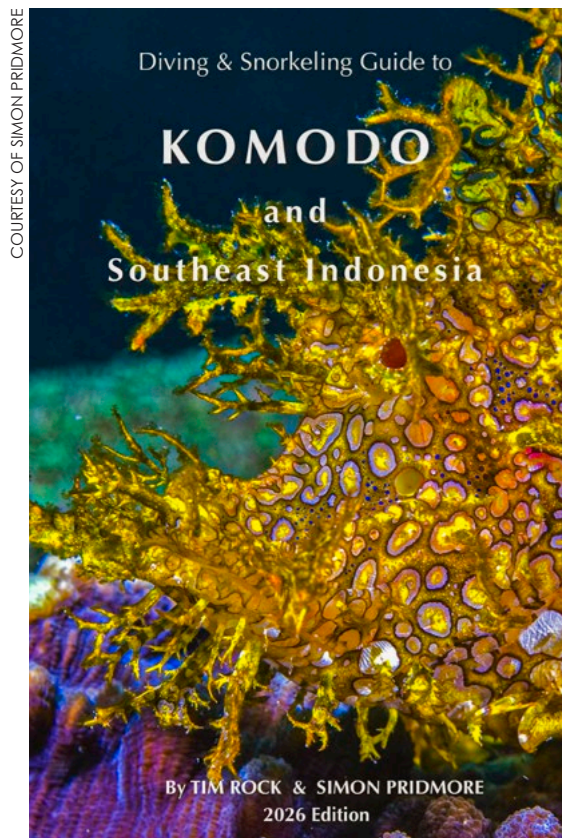
SIMON PRIDMORE

## Banda Sea



The liveboard phinisi *Carpe Diem* (left); The town of Saumlaki in the Tanimbar Islands (above); Sangliat Dol stairway (right); Cover of the new guidebook by Simon Pridmore and Tim Rock on diving in Komodo and Southeast Indonesia to be published later this year (bottom left)

COURTESY OF SIMON PRIDMORE



popular locations, of course, but always had the nagging feeling that there was likely to be more great diving to be found off the beaten track in this region, especially around the southernmost islands of the Banda Sea, where there were no resorts and which had only very rarely been visited by liveboards.

### Getting there

However, these islands are so remote, and running a trip across an unknown route is always a gamble on several levels. We would need a boat operator and a team of diving companions willing to take the gamble with us. Then, just after the COVID-19 shutdown, we

were blessed by two strokes of good fortune. First, we came across a relatively newly launched and gorgeous boutique liveboard phinisi called *Carpe Diem*, run by a team who were keen to explore new itineraries. And second, a small team of patient, enthusiastic and adventurous divers volunteered to join us.

We decided to travel from west to east along the southernmost strip of islands in the Banda Sea from Kalabahi on the island of Alor to Saumlaki on the island of Yamdena in the Tanimbar Islands. We had two main reasons for choosing these as our starting and finishing points. First, they are both quite accessible. Kalabahi

has daily flights from Kupang in West Timor, which in turn is fed by flights from Bali, Jakarta or Surabaya, and Saumlaki enjoys daily flights from Makassar via Ambon. And second, both towns lie close to a completely unmissable cultural highlight.

### People and culture

Nestled in the hills around Kalabahi sits the ancient village of Takpala, which offers visitors a chance to experience Indonesia's astonishing cultural kaleidoscope. It is home to the Abui, Alor's mountain people, the perfect place to witness their unique homes and sacred places, watch traditional dances and

marvel at their handicrafts.

While the people of Takpala still pursue the ways of their ancestors, the present-day inhabitants of the village of Sangliat Dol, a few minutes' drive from Saumlaki, are the caretakers of relics left by unknown people of a megalithic culture that occupied the Tanimbar Islands 1,500 or more years ago, and who are now long gone.

Here, an ancient stone stairway rises from the white sand beach 200ft (60m) or more up the cliffside. It leads to an open space, in the middle of which lies a large boat built of stone, designed to represent the vessels that the ancestors of the builders once arrived in.



SIMON PRIDMORE





Juvenile emperor angelfish sheltering in the reef (above); Sila Beach, Lakor Island (top right); Map of southern Banda Sea (right)

The boat features a stone prow and a stone rudder, both of which are decorated with carvings in the same fashion as the stairway. Before roads were built through the hills in recent times, nobody lived in the interior of Yamdena. Everybody lived in coastal villages. It is easy to imagine boatloads of islanders arriving on the beach below Sangliat Dol, then climbing the stairway and assembling in the open space to participate in the ceremonies conducted on the boat platform. It must have been quite a spectacle.

### Diving the South Banda Islands

Here are a few excerpts from our guide to give you a taste of what this remote part of the world has to offer to adventurous divers.

**Wetar.** There is some excellent drift diving in the channel between the small island of Reong and the north-west tip of the massive island of Wetar. The reef wall on the Wetar side drops away in a steep slope close to shore, so the best plan is to see the way the current is running, then drop in some distance along the wall from the point where the wall curves and

go with the flow.

On the way, you will see armies of fusiliers charging around and more sedate groups of surgeonfish and black snappers gathering where the wall changes direction. We have seen eagle rays, dog tooth tuna and large mackerel here, so keep an eye on the blue as you drift along. Keep a lookout for blue whales and sperm whales passing through, too, as this is a favourite migration route.

**Reong.** On the Reong side of the channel, massive outcrops of multicoloured black coral sprout from the

wall and are crammed into crevices. Deeper, search for sleeping whitetip reef sharks on the seabed, and be on the lookout for tuna and other silvery ocean travellers passing by.

The shallow, white sand patches on top of the wall, where a multitude of small fish gather among stands of staghorn coral, are ideal for snorkelers and a good place for divers to spend the last few minutes of their dive. This east-facing wall is best explored in

the morning, when it enjoys direct sunlight, but it is also magical in the afternoon, when the black coral bushes loom eerily in the gloom.

**Kisar.** Southwest of Wetar and due north of the eastern tip of Timor Leste lies Kisar. On the west coast of the island, there is a small port for ferries from Kupang and Ambon, nestling below the layered, rocky escarpment. South of the port is Madalahar Beach, and on a cliff beyond the



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School of anthias on reef (above); Ornate ghost pipefish with artistic photo effect (bottom right)

beach is a structure erected long ago by Dutch colonists that local people call “the pyramid”. It is more likely to be a memorial of some kind, though many decades of battering by wind and water have conspired to remove any identifying features. As is the case with many of the islands in the Banda Sea and West Papua, there is also ancient rock art on Kisar, from much, much longer ago than the colonial period.

Below the pyramid, underwater, a sand chute punctuates the reef wall, leading to a sheer drop-off at 80ft (24m). It is as if the wall has been cut with a knife. Looking down, at first glance, you will think you are gazing into a bottomless pit, but, as your

eyes adjust, you will see schools of fish cruising around—fusiliers, surgeons, snapper, bluefin trevally and the like. This seems to be a favourite gathering place. You can either watch from the sand chute or drop in and join the throng. Keep an eye on your depth, though. It is easy to get distracted by everything that is going on.

**Moa.** On the northeast tip of Moa Island in the Leti Archipelago, sits a picture-perfect “million-dollar” white sand beach. Start your dive below the rock escarpment to the east of the beach and swim right shoulder to the slope. The *Acropora* sp. coral outcrops here are a hiding place for myriad small fish and juveniles, and

macro photographers will find plenty of fascinating subjects, such as mushroom-coral pipefish, baby longnose filefish, Pontoh’s pygmy seahorses and crinoid shrimp.

Later, post dive, as you cruise south down the straits, the mysterious, multi-peaked mass of Gunung Kerbau (Buffalo Mountain) will appear on the horizon to the west, dominating central Moa. The surrounding savannah is home to herds of wild buffalo and horses.

**Lakor.** Pantai Sila is a superb, picturesque, L-shaped, white sand beach lined with tall palms, on the west coast of Lakor Island. At the southern end of the beach is a small port,

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## A New Dive Book from Simon Pridmore

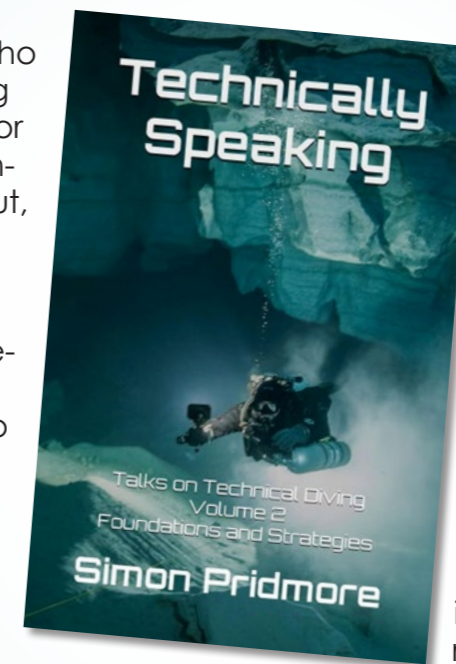
*Technically Speaking: Talks on Technical Diving Volume 2: Foundations and Strategies* is the second book in this series by best-selling author Simon Pridmore.

Part one, “Foundations”, is for people who are thinking of getting into technical diving or wondering what technical diving is all about, introducing topics such as the pros and cons, the attributes you need, how to prepare, what to expect from a course, how to choose your training path and common mistakes new technical divers make.

Part two, “Strategies”, is for qualified technical divers looking for new perspectives and insights. The topics also include examples to follow and precedents to avoid if you want to prosper in this most challenging and complex of sport diving’s disciplines.

These talks reflect Simon’s take on dive safety and technique, and he shares what he has learned over the

decades he has spent involved in technical diving, identifying areas where further progress in the sport is still needed and where common practice could be improved.



Author Simon Pridmore has been at the sharp end of the scuba diving industry for 30 years. He pioneered mixed-gas deep diving in Asia, and he has held the regional franchises for IANTD in the western Pacific and the United Kingdom. He also spent several years working for cutting-edge mixed-gas computer and rebreather manufacturers VR Technology. Today, Simon is one of scuba diving’s most prolific writers, with a five-volume *Scuba* series,

several guides for travelling divers, a biography, a novel and even a couple of divers’ cookbooks to his name.

Available in hardcover, paperback and ebook: **Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, Apple.** For more information, visit: [simonpridmorebooks.com](http://simonpridmorebooks.com)



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*Costasiella* sp. nudibranch (above); Egg cowrie on soft coral (top left); Emperor shrimp on sea cucumber (top right); Pair of whip coral gobies on whip coral (right)

which connects islanders to Moa across the channel. From the port, the beach runs north to a sharp point, where it makes an abrupt 90-degree turn to the east. The west-facing section of beach is the more beautiful, but it is the north-facing stretch where divers should focus their attention, as the gorgeous, wide reef top and deep, steep wall are worthy of multiple dives, even multiple days.

Along the north-facing section of the beach, halfway between the corner and the Lakor Jetty, there is a large crevice festooned in black coral bushes, gorgonian fans and golden soft corals guarded by a dozen or more enormous barrel sponges.

The wall here is lushly carpeted, no space is left bare, and, at times, when the current is running, it plays host to a swirling mass of life, with mul-

tipple schools of fish circling around, filling the crevice, spilling into the depths and out to sea.

**Amortaun.** East of Lakor, the first few small islands of the Sermata island group form part of a large pygmy sea-horse-shaped reef system, much of it only visible when the tide is out. Amortaun is the island near the north-west point of the system—the sea-horse's head, if you like.

West of the island, there is a huge plateau with healthy hard corals, which extends over a mile out from land at a steady depth of less than 30ft (9m). You can begin the dive on the reef wall to the north or west, depending on which way the current is running, and start the dive deep to see what you can find. We have seen Napoleon wrasse, whitetip reef sharks

and schools of fusiliers and surgeonfish, but the stars of this site are to be found on the plateau in the form of schools of black snapper, rabbit fish and sweetlips, as well as a sizeable herd of bumphead parrot fish and a big school of barracuda.

**Kelapa.** Pulau Kelapa is the iron-flat, barren, uninhabited island between the more mountainous and populous islands of Luang and Sermata, and this site, at the northeastern tip of Pulau Kelapa, is fabulous. Expect current, a steep wall, some large schools of fish and a luxuriant reef top. The schools here include small-spotted darts, bluefin trevally, rabbit fish and, unusually, sailfin snapper. But the biggest of them all is a massive conglomeration of hundreds of batfish that courses around the point,



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Schools of barracuda can be seen hovering over the reefs at Dawera Island

although perhaps "point" is a misnomer because the reef curves around at its furthest reach from land, so you have a succession of buttresses and clefts in the wall forming a cape, rather than a single tip.

**Wetan.** Wetan is the smaller island to the west of Babar. The channel between the two is a good place to spend a dive day, especially when an easterly wind is blowing. On the west side of the channel, a patch reef with large patches of *Acropora*

sp. corals is distinguished by a snow-white landslide where, it seems, a jetty once stood. This is a nice fishy dive. Look out especially for multiple huge schools of yellow-tailed goatfish.

**Dawera.** Dawera is the northernmost of a pair of small islands west of Yamdena (the other is Dawelor). It has three villages and a population of several hundred people. Cement roads connect the villages and various parts of the island, although there are no vehicles. The islands

look like sculpted layer cakes, with a succession of long limestone terraces, and are surrounded by clear blue water and several shallow sea-mounts. They are bright green in the rainy season and dusty brown at other times.

The east-facing wall of Dawera makes an excellent morning dive, with large sea fans, spectacular hard corals and schools of barracuda and fusiliers. The magic spot is at a point in the reef, marked on land by some enormous rock slabs, two of which

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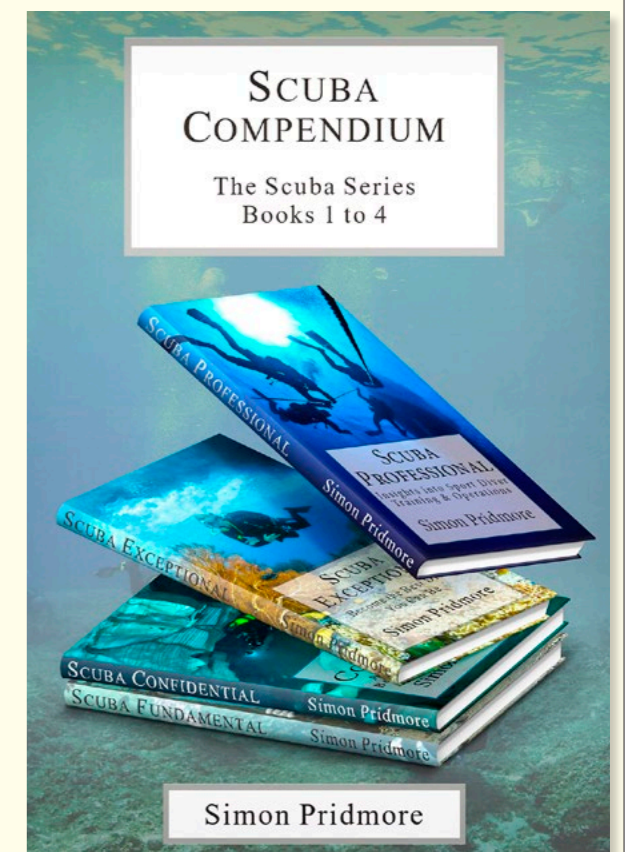
## NEW 4 in 1!

Simon Pridmore has released a new single-volume e-book, bringing together four books in his bestselling *Scuba* series:

- *Scuba Fundamental – Start Diving the Right Way*
- *Scuba Confidential – An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver*
- *Scuba Exceptional – Become the Best Diver You Can Be, and*
- *Scuba Professional – Insights into Sport Diver Training & Operations*

As Simon puts it, this is "a remastering and repackaging of the original albums rather than a greatest hits." Nothing is missing. *Scuba Compendium* gives e-book readers the advantage of being able to access all the knowledge contained in the four books in one place, making this a unique and easily searchable work of reference for divers at every level.

Simon has always promoted the idea of safer diving through the acquisition of knowledge, which is why he has chosen to release this highly accessible version. If you have read his work before, you will know that he provides divers with extremely useful advice and information, much



of it unavailable elsewhere; his points often illustrated by real life experiences and cautionary tales. He examines familiar issues from new angles, looks at the wider picture and borrows techniques and procedures from other areas of human activity.

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stand together as a pair of rectangular pillars. There is a small fisherman's hut below.

**Selaru.** A white sand critter dive near this lighthouse can prove highly rewarding, and it is a great place to round off a liveaboard cruise before you disembark in nearby Saumlaki. On one memorable dive here, with the guides right on top of their game, we found short pouch pygmy pipefish, pygmy cuttlefish, ocellated tozeuma or broken-back shrimp, juve-

nile filefish, razorfish, egg cowries and many nudibranchs and batwing slugs.

### More exploration required

We are confident that this route will become more travelled over the coming years. As you can see from the above paragraphs, it shows enormous promise.

When we travel to new places, we use our experience to guess which topside and underwater features are likely to provide good diving and plenty of marine life. Sometimes we



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Visitors hike up the steep, ancient stone stairs of the Sangliat Dol stairway (above); School of fusiliers (left); Bluespotted ribbontail ray (bottom left)



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are wrong, but we are usually right. We have been doing this for a long time, and we have always enjoyed excellent advice from the dive guides we work with. In the case of this itinerary, wise counsel came from the Carpe Diem Phinisi's very own Agus Wongkar.

A final caveat and also a word of encouragement. We know that the underwater wonders we have uncovered on our exploration of the islands in the south of the Banda Sea represent just a tiny part of what lies beneath in this region. We look forward to hearing about the adventures of those who follow in our fin-steps off-piste in the blue yonder. ■

Simon Pridmore is the author of the international bestsellers *Scuba*

*Fundamental: Start Diving the Right Way*, *Scuba Confidential: An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver*, *Scuba Exceptional: Become the Best Diver You Can Be* and *Scuba Professional: Insights into Sport Diver Training & Operations*, now available as a compendium. He is also co-author of the *Diving & Snorkeling Guide to Bali* and the *Diving & Snorkeling Guide to Raja Ampat & Northeast Indonesia*. His latest books include *The Diver Who Fell from the Sky*, *Dive into Taiwan*, *Scuba Physiological: Think You Know All About Scuba Medicine? Think Again!* and the *Dining with Divers* series of cookbooks. Visit: [simonpridmorebooks.com](http://simonpridmorebooks.com) and **Scuba Conversational**

