



# UNDER THE HAMMER



**DAN BURTON** has knocked around the world a fair bit in his years of diving, but there was a 28-year hiatus in which Indonesia didn't feature on his agenda. Now he's making up for lost time with a vengeance

**L**AST YEAR I HAD THE CHANCE to visit North Sulawesi and dive the renowned island of Bunaken. In the January issue I described it as one of the best sites I had visited in many years.

Suitably enthused by Indonesia, my next diving adventure there would take me on to the remote region of Raja Ampat in West Papua.

Getting there from the UK involves a long-haul flight to Jakarta, with several internal flights and an overnight stopover.

I arrived somewhat jet-lagged in Saumlaki on Yamdena island, which is a mere 200 nautical miles from northern Australia. Greeted by smiling dive-guide Andris, I was whisked through the chaos of the city to where the liveaboard *Amira* was moored in the harbour.

Over the next 10 days I was to embark on the Jewels of Indonesia tour, which claims to be the *crème de la crème* of remote Indonesian dive safaris.

The *Amira's* design is based on that of a traditional Indonesian spice-trading ship, with a *phinisi* rig. These vessels were mostly built in Sulawesi.

*Amira* is 54m long and has a 10m beam, making her one of the largest liveaboards in the country. She is fitted with three masts and an impressive collection of nine sails.

With that huge hull, *Amira* can carry up to 19 passengers comfortably and comes with a friendly crew of 24.

I was struck not only by the sheer overall size but by the spacious luxurious cabins above and below deck level, easily accessible dive-deck and well-equipped camera-prep room.

**W**E HEADED NORTH to a small island called Nitu, where we stayed overnight. The following morning brought a check-dive on the local reefs before heading off on the first overnight passage to our first proper dive-site.

Because the weather conditions were so good, Swiss owner Bruno made a route change to the charter and offered us the chance of taking in the



islands of Serua and Kekeh. These isolated sites are generally visited only when the weather is favourable and the hammerhead sharks are in season.

These secret sites were rarely dived until around 10 years ago, when they were discovered to be a hammerhead hotspot.

The 100-mile journey took nine hours. We arrived early in the morning to the breath-taking sight of these small islands in the middle of nowhere. Serua has only a few dozen houses and 100 residents.

The island is inhabited only during harvest season for nutmeg and cloves, and the people spend the rest of their time living on Seram, a larger island.

Serua is an active volcano, though it hasn't erupted since 1884, and that's why permanent habitation is frowned on, but the locals harvest their spices regardless.

Our one dive there revealed an abundance of sea snakes, then we moved on to Kekeh. There are several sites there but we concentrated on a wall-dive on the southern side, Papan Biru, where sheer cliffs dropped away from the lushly covered island.

I had seen only one hammerhead in 30 years of diving, so I was eager to witness large schools and, I hoped, close up.

The dive-teams were split into two groups and sent off on two RIBs, one 15 minutes after the other. Divemaster Ading carried out a current-check, then we made a negative descent to the sloping reef.

The reef dropped gently to a beautiful coral garden covered in huge barrel sponges. We drifted along the slope among the whip corals as they fluttered in the slow current, heading for a corner known for large pelagic sightings.

We followed the guides until we lost sight of the reef. It was quite eerie floating around in midwater, unable to see either surface or seabed.

Seconds later I heard a load of grunting from Ading, who was pointing at faint shadows in the gloom below him. Then he rapidly descended into the depths.

A few swift fin-kicks and I had dropped

to 35m, where I could just see a small group of hammerheads cruising through the murky waters. I lined the camera up, got two shots – and then they were gone!

When we repeated the dive we reached the reef corner, where we had to hold on for dear life, battling a ferocious current. Within a few minutes the hammerheads

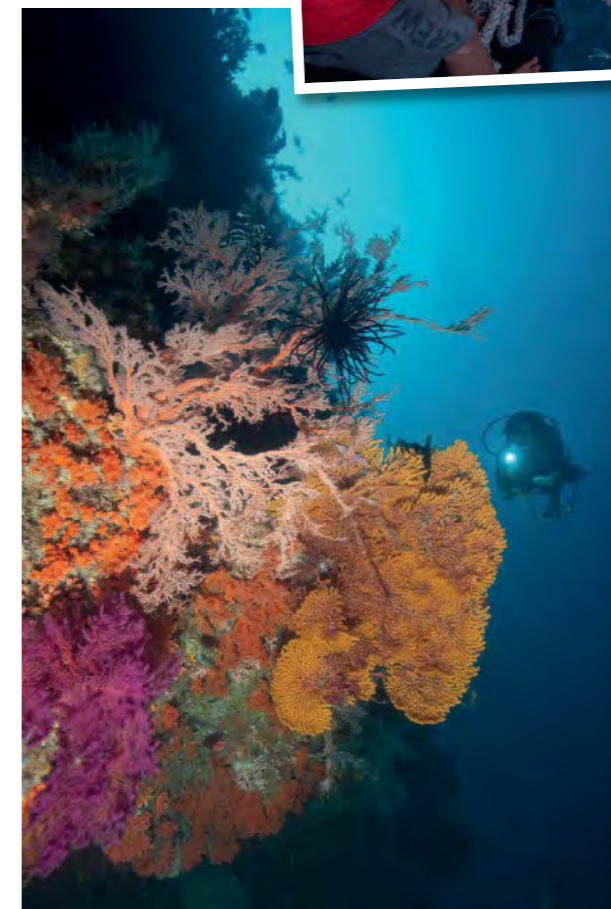
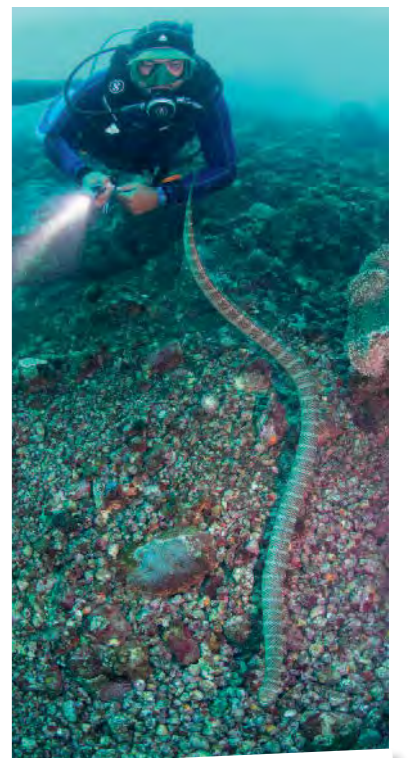
**Opposite page:** The hammerhead sharks could play hard to get, but they were often to be found.

**Above:** The *Amira* under sail.

**Above right:** Banded sea-snake at Serua.

**Right:** Divers move away from *Amira* in one of the RIBs.

**Below:** Soft corals at Kekeh reef.



appeared. Here was my chance – I had my camera in one hand, a rock in the other.

I turned my head to capture the scene, but all I got was a faceful of water as my mask lifted off my face under the battering water pressure.

I rattled off a few shots blindly, and seconds later the sharks were gone.

**L**LEFT THE ISLAND feeling disheartened but Bruno said there was another site known for its shark sightings.

That night we headed north and arrived early to a flat-calm sea with a picturesque view of the small island of Hatta – we would be diving a nearby atoll.

We dropped in on the south-eastern side of the reef and headed down the slope into the blue, drifting west.

Ading signalled to the group and descended to where I could faintly see the grey shapes of a few hammerheads patrolling the reef-line, their tails swaying in synchronisation. Unfortunately,





**Above, from left:** Spectacular corals and sponges under reef overhangs; barracuda at Magic Mountain.

**Left:** Sting ray.

**Below:** Banded shrimp.

**Bottom, from left:** Jack off Hatta reef; limestone island in Raja Ampat.

they were just too far away to photograph.

Disappointed, I swam back to the reef and back to the shallows. Then, as I looked up to the top of the reef, I spotted a lone young hammerhead.

I needed to intercept it, so headed off at an angle. It was now or never!

I changed my camera setting, preset the shutter-speed, turned the autofocus off and swam as fast as I could. It might have been young but it was still big. I had reached to within 2m when it turned, but looked at me with no trace of concern.

Swimming as fast I could, I motored off a few shots before the oceanic cruiser headed effortlessly back over the ledge, leaving me out of breath.

**SIX DAYS INTO** the tour, we had one more long crossing to reach the highlight of the trip, the island of Misool.

Raja Ampat is home to the world's richest reefs and dive-sites. Located at the heart of the Coral Triangle, the archipelago sprawls over 17,000sq miles and comprises more than 1500 small islands, cays and shoals surrounding the



four main islands of Misool, Salawati, Batanta, and Waigeo, and the smaller Kofiau.

Some 1320 coral-reef fish and more than 550 species of hard corals are reckoned to exist here – that's a mind-blowing 70% of all the known coral species on the planet.

There are seven marine parks with Misool being one, about the size of Singapore. It was protected in 2005, and marine life is said to have increased there by 250% between 2013-2017 alone, with certain sites showing increases of more than 600%.

We were taken to Boo West, a favourite spot with the guides. A coral island no bigger than a tennis court and a few trees was what we saw. From shore the seabed dropped a few metres, then we rapidly descended a steep slope to 50m.

The visibility wasn't that good, but on the other hand that's because the water was enriched with superfood for all the species around.

First we saw the schools of silversides. The tiny fish came rushing past, swaying to and fro in huge baitballs and leaving me confused as to which way was up and which down!

Andris headed down the sloping reef and crossed to a pinnacle about 25m away. As we followed, he signalled and pointed up. Near the surface a small school of devilfish glided, twisting, turning and looping as they gorged on the abundance of food there.

The pinnacle started to appear and we were met by two huge shoals of barracuda

and jack as they swam over the reef.

We made our way up the slope and hovered around the top of the pinnacle amid the brightly coloured array of marine life. Just above, it was possible to make out the limestone island's overhangs, eroded over countless years.

We spent the last few minutes in their shade, exploring the shallows and a colourful reef made up of a bewildering variety of coral species.

**MAGIC MOUNTAIN** is an underwater knoll rising from 50m to just 3m, with another such mount nearby, and is a favourite site, but dive-vessels must first obtain permission from the local Misool resort, which runs the Misool Foundation. Its mission is to safeguard these biodiverse reefs through the empowerment of local communities.

The resort told us that manta rays were about, boosting excitement levels as we kitted up. Ading led the group down a sloping saddle and across to the other pinnacle at 20m.

Almost on cue and from out of nowhere a giant oceanic manta appeared, followed seconds later by two others swooping in over our heads.

The divers from the boat hovered in a semi-circle around the reef and together we watched a jaw-dropping performance as the mantas looped around us.

We slowly moved back up from the deeper reef to spend the last 20 minutes investigating the shallows, but the manta followed us, performing more gyrations.

Divers are not allowed to swim towards mantas, one of the rules strictly



**Above:** Oceanic manta ray at the Magic Mountain cleaning station.

**Right:** Walking shark seen on a night-dive.

**Below:** Well-camouflaged wobbegong carpet shark.





enforced by the marine park authorities, so we waited patiently as they came to us.

The whole cleaning process is fascinating. The mantas come in like gliders and, at the last second, they stall, hovering just over the reef-top while twisting and turning their cephalic lobes and pectoral fins and becoming almost static for 30 seconds or so.

Next, an army of parasitic copepods and a variety of small cleaner wrasse come in and remove any unwanted travellers from the rays' skin.

If the first clean is not enough the mantas go off and circle the reef before returning minutes later. If you're really

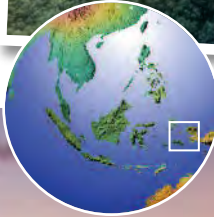
lucky you can watch them lining up to get cleaned, like vehicles at a car wash.

Diving doesn't get much better than this, offering spectacular reefs and eye-popping marine life.

On this trip, I saw many new species including the elusive walking shark, wobbegongs and a multitude of previously unseen macro critters – as well as those mighty hammerheads.

I have been fortunate to visit some amazing sites over the past 30 years but this trip topped them all. All the sites were pristine and the marine-life abundant.

I look forward to discovering more of this region's hidden secrets.



**FACTFILE**

**GETTING THERE** ▶ International flights from UK via Jakarta with Singapore Airlines, internal flights with Lion Air.

**DIVING & ACCOMMODATION** ▶ *Amira*, [amira-indonesia.com](http://amira-indonesia.com)

**WHEN TO GO** ▶ Year round.

**MONEY** ▶ Indonesian rupiah.

**PRICES** ▶ The 11-night *Jewels of Indonesia* trip costs from US \$5863pp, and there is also a 14-night version. *Amira* also offers a number of other itineraries. Return flights from UK to Saumlaki from £1350.

**VISITOR INFORMATION** ▶ [indonesia.travel](http://indonesia.travel)

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