The Heart of the Coral Triangle

Sulawesi to Komodo

Superlatives flow when it comes to the marine life of Sulawesi and the Banda Sea. Right in the heart of the famed Coral Triangle every reef seems to team with impossibly brilliant new fish and the waters through which our lovely 40m yacht sleekly glides are rich in dolphins, whales, turtles and manta rays.

It is not all about the ocean though for there is so much to see on land too. We'll land daily to experience all manner of highlights most notably meeting the largest lizards in the world – the Komodo Dragon. We'll visit the amazing sea bird nesting colonies on the remote island of Kakabia in the middle of the Banda Sea and experience thousands of Red-footed Boobies, Brown Boobies and Lesser Frigatebirds flying around our heads.

But it will be the underwater life that will be the centre-piece of this trip. Every day we'll snorkel the reefs. Those in the Wakatobi Archipelago are recognized as being the most diverse in the World (and there's some competition locally!) with in a single protected area around a thousand species of reef fish and amazingly 750 coral species out of a world total of 850! Truly extraordinary. Spinner Dolphins and Fraser's Dolphins course through the water as we watch the bewildering spectacle below – twenty species of Butterflyfish, striking Angelfish, a glorious variety of Wrasse, brilliant Boxfish, vertical Razorfish, colourful Groupers and sinuous Moray Eels. And then there's the Whale Sharks…

Days 1 & 2
To Bitung, Sulawesi

Our journey to Bitung in takes us via Singapore Airport to Manado and though the flight times in themselves are not overly long – it is thirteen hours to Singapore and another three hours forty minutes to Manado – the effect of the time difference means that a lunchtime departure from Europe means a late lunch time arrival in Manado. It is just a short journey to our hotel in Bitung. There's an optional afternoon visit to Tangkoko National Park. Anyone wanting to spend more time at this exceptional national park should perhaps arrival a day or two earlier… for notes on what you might see go to the end of this itinerary.

Day 3
Lembeh

In the morning we'll embark the Katharina. This lovely yacht will be our home for the next two weeks. The Katherina is as elegant as it gets. A beautifully proportioned wooden boat she has relatively spacious cabins below the deck and on deck, where of course we'll spend much of our time, she has a large dining area and a sheltered galley too should the weather be inclement. The crew are a delight and will without seeming to be there run the boat efficiently whilst providing us with wonderful meals and be on hand to man the zodiacs for all the snorkelling and land trips we'll be doing daily. After familiarizing ourselves with the

Katharina we'll have a morning visit to the Tasikoki Wildlife Rescue Centre. It will be an opportunity to see some of the region's wildlife that we'll be very unlikely to come across in the wild during the trip such as the famed Barbirusa and the Anoa otherwise known as the Sulawesi Dwarf Buffalo. There's also an active programme to try and place macaques back in the wild. There are many species of Macaque in Sulawesi and virtually all are endemic – the species local to this area such as Celebes Crested Macaque, Gorontalo Macaque and Heck's Macaques all pass through the centre from time to time.

Next we'll have our first opportunity to snorkel. The coral reefs we'll visit throughout this trip are world-class and even our first trip out will be far more than a wet-your-mask getting used to the water dip, for the reef creatures found around Lembeh are just outrageous. Amongst a plethora of gorgeous fish there's the fabulous Pajama Cardinal Fish, and little can be better than the orange, bright green and black Mandarin Fish. In sandy areas there are several species of spectacular Ribbon Eels which like to stay half in the safety of their burrows. There's nudibranchs such as *Nembrotha kubaryana*, whose most common morph has a black body base and green pustules and rhinophores, with orange gills and edge of foot, and *Chromodoris magnifica* with its orange black and white striped body complete with orange-red horns and tuft! We might find the vari-coloured Common seahorse which can be quite a decent size, whereas the Flamboyant Cuttlefish is rather small but amazingly designed. There are quite a number of Octopus species in Lembeh's reefs but two really standout. The Mimic Octopus is known to mimic 17 different species (so far), including the sea snake, flounder, lionfish, sting ray and feather star. Then there's the newly described Wunderpus Octopus whose latin name *Wunderpus photogenicus* says it all.

In the afternoon we'll set sail for Salongo, halfway to the Togian Islands, which we'll reach the next morning. Out on deck this will be out first chance to look for dolphins and in this region three species are tolerably common Spinner Dolphin, Bottlenose Dolphin, and the Pantropical Spotted Dolphin.

Day 4
Salongo and to the Togean Islands

We'll pay a visit to the village of Salongo where we should look out for Black-capped and Collared Kingfishers before heading to a nearby coastal reef for a spot of snorkeling. Moray Eels are frequently sighted on these reefs and there's a tremendous abundance of damselfishes and anthias making for a colourful show amongst the stagshorn corals in the shallows. As with most of the reefs we'll visit the number and variety of butterflyfish is outstanding, some of the reefs we'll visit can have twenty species. Here we'll find Eastern Triangular Butterflyfish, Spot-nape Butterflyfish, Threadfin and Redfin Butterflyfishes, and the lovely Panda Butterflyfish as well as countless others. Big fish abound. Black-tip Reef Shark cruise through and Blue-spotted Ribbon-tail Rays sand-hop away from us. There are huge shoals of Fusiliers. Small groups of Yellow-tail Blue Snapper pretend to be Fusiliers! Majestic Titan Triggerfish are an impressive sight and we'll see the large and strangely proportioned Scrawled Filefish. Parrotfish are many and varied at this spot, new

and there's also an exceptional variety of Rabbitfish with Masked and Foxface Rabbitfishes joined by Gold-spotted and Dusky Rabbitfishes. There are so many little fish in the shallows. Blacktail Humbugs dance atop corals and as with all the sites we'll visit there's a crazy variety of Damsels and Chromis including the brilliant Blue & Gold Damsel, lovely Bluespot Damsel, and the even more gorgeous Bluestreak Damsel. There are groups of Dark Surgeonfish and Orange-socket Surgeonfish, and some beautiful Wrasse including Pin-striped Wrasse and the Blackeye Thicklip. Groups of fabulous Golden Spadefish hang in the water like kites. Careful searching amongst the corals might reveal Scorpionfish.

Near Gorontalo we'll pay a visit to a little harbour where for many years now is home to a couple of Whale Sharks at this season. Snorkelling with these is a most amazing experience - they are so gentle. They seem almost oblivious to us ungainly creatures, cruising through the waters sometimes so close that they gently bump into us.

In the afternoon we'll continue towards the Togean Islands.

Day 5 - 8
The Togean islands & the Tompotika peninsula

The reefs around the gorgeous and little-known Togean Islands are full of brilliant Anthias, Damselfish and Parrotfish, and Green Turtles are common. We'll visit a number of exciting snorkelling spots around the islands but of particular note is Pulau Waleabahi. There are all manner of amazing fish here. The Clown Triggerfish is an arresting sight and there's the lovely Yellow Boxfish, really a little box with fins! Amongst the butterflyfish are Spot-tailed Butterflyfish and the very striking Meyer's Butterflyfishes. The related Threeband Pennantfish is also here and we should see both Three-spot and the very well-named Bicolor Angelfish. Shoals of the gorgeous little Blue Devils inhabit coral heads and amongst many other related species we'll see Lined Chromis, Bicolor Chromis, Pale Spot Damsel and Scaly Damsel. Hiding in some spectacular groups of anemones are little groups of the rather pugnacious Spinecheek Anemonefish. Huge black white-spotted Midnight Snapper are only the youngster! Other fish on this reef include Red Snapper, Big-eye and Paddletail Snappers, Redfin Bream and little groups of the distinctive Goldspot Sunbream. There's also Bird Wrasse, Yellowtail Tubelip, Yellow-margin Triggerfish, Blue-lined and Orange-banded Surgeonfishes, the lovely Spotted Boxfish and a whole host of Wrasse which we'll by now be gradually unravelling the mysteries of identifying – Dusky, Axilspot, Chiseltooth, Two-tone and Six-bar Wrasse.

One evening we'll watch spellbound as hundreds of Knobbed Hornbills fly past us in formation heading off to their roosts. Before watching the flocks of hornbills going to roost we'll take a walk in the forests near Tumbulawa which offer some great birding. We might glimpse a Philippine Scrubfowl or two whilst all the time pigeons are flying over - Silver-tipped and White-bellied Imperial Pigeons are most noticeable, the beautiful Black-naped Fruit-Dove is rather common but less easy to spot. Ivory-backed Wood Swallows hawk for butterflies over mangroves where we can spot Black-billed and Collared Kingfishers. In taller trees we might see and

will more certainly hear the impressive Ashy Woodpeckers. There's the lovely Ornate Lorikeet as well as two rather unusual parrots – the Blue-crowned Racquet-tail and the more common Golden-mantled Racquet-tail.

These islands have several endemic subspecies of mammal including the Togean Macaque and the Togean Barbirusa – the latter may soon be split as a full species. As recently as last year a new species of Tarsier, Niemitz's Tarsier was described from the Togian Islands. It seems likely that much more lies waiting the dedicated naturalist on the Togian Islands as this island group has long been separated from the rest of Sulawesi by deep water allowing for new forms to develop – there have recently been new species of Monitor Lizard and Giant Fruit Bat described from the archipelago.

As we leave the Togian Islands we'll cross to the nearby arm of mainland Sulawesi and the Tompotika peninsula. This rugged region has little development and so there are large areas of largely natural forest. The strange and now very rare Maleo, a half metre long megapode, uses the warm volcanic sands on the peninsula to incubate its eggs and we'll go ashore to find these avian oddities. Ruddy and Sulawesi Dwarf Kingfisher may be found here. There's a large Flying Fox roost in the village of Taima and of course we'll have plenty of time for snorkeling on the wonderful reefs around the islands of Pulodoa.

Day 9
Pulau Banggai

The bustling markets on Banggai will be quite an experience but again the underwater world eclipses it with the stunning Banggai Cardinal Fish - one of the World's most distinctive and beautiful creatures. They are tolerably common still in the shallows even around harbour though numbers are diminishing due to the aquarium trade. We'll visit the Banggai Cardinal Fish Conservation Project whilst there. We'll also head out to nearby Bakakang Island to snorkel with these lovely little fish. The reef here is sandy with lots of little coral heads and so it's a good place to see Lionfish and we've a reasonable chance of coming across Sea Snakes here too. The little corals each have groups of Neon Damselfish and pairs of Lemon Damselfish and often little parties of colourful Anthias hovering above them. Blackpatch and Half-moon Triggerfishes mooch about the sandy flats and occasionally we'll disturb Brown Reticulated Stingrays and watch them as they 'flow' off out of the sight. In the evening we'll set sail for the Pulau Mbuang-Mbuang.

Day 10
The Bokan Islands

We'll be able to spend all day today enjoying the Bokan Islands a remote archipelago well off the east coast of Central Sulawesi and where the Molucca Sea meets the Banda Sea. The landscapes are beautiful and the waters extremely rich. There are literally hundreds and hundreds of clams and Giant Clams in the water we'll snorkel here. On land too we'll take our snorkels to a lake full of

stingless *Aurelia* and *Mastigias* Jellyfish – a surreal experience! We'll also spend some in a local village where White-bellied Sea Eagles cruise overhead and Brown-throated Sunbirds search the gardens for nectar. After dark the Katharina will head southwards and in the morning we'll wake up off of the tiny atol that is Pulau Samarengga.

Day 11
Samarengga Atol

Here we are fully into the northern Banda Sea. Samarengga Atol is a tiny speck of land 40 kilometres from the nearest islands.

In the morning we'll visit the remarkable sea gypsy village on Samarengga and meet a people whose lives are almost totally marine. In the past these peoples were largely nomadic (hence 'sea gypsies') and though they are now in the main practicing a more settled life their lives are still very much marine.

Right in front of the village is a fabulous reef. Here we can snorkel with Reef Sharks, Octopuses and Hawksbill Turtles. Moray Eels are unusually common along the reefs spectacular drop-off and this is a rich spot for nudibranchs with many species known. One of your leaders, Anastasia, is a nudibranch nut, and she'll take great delight in finding these fabulous creatures and showing them to you every time we snorkel. Particularly noteworthy is the abundance of Blue Tang here, a uniquely brilliant blue black and yellow fish that is known locally as the 'stupid fish' as when it feels threatened it sticks its head in the corals and leaves the rest of the body outside in full view!

Late in the afternoon we'll set sail for the Wakatobi Archipelago. We'll have a great chance to find cetaceans in these waters as several species migrate through the area at this season - Pantropical Spotted Dolphins and Bottlenose Dolphins are very common and we're also likely to see Fraser's Dolphin, Risso's Dolphin, and maybe some whales such as Melon-headed Whale or Pygmy Killer Whale.

Days 12-14
Wakatobi National Park – the most diverse reef in the world!

The coral reefs of the Wakatobi Archipelago are recognized as being the most diverse in the World (and there's some competition locally!) with in a single protected area around a thousand species of reef fish and amazingly 750 coral species out of a world total of 850! Truly extraordinary.

Wakatobi National Park is famed for its colourful coral reefs, but its white-sand beaches, mangrove forests, traditional weaving villages and historical ruins are also of the highest order. After arriving at Wangi-Wangi, the main island of Wakatobi, we will tour around the island, visiting the capital Wanci, a seaweed farm, and a traditional weaving community. In Desa Liya, we can see the impressive remains of Benteng Lya Togo, a fort with a mosque on the compound.

However the lure of the reef can't wait long here so we'll no doubt be champing at the bit to get under wat when we arrive at Pulau Hoga, were we can experience some superb snorkelling during our first afternoon in the archipelago. It is a bewildering spectacle – twenty species of Butterflyfish, striking Angelfish, a glorious variety of Wrasse, brilliant Boxfish, vertical Razorfish, colourful Groupers and sinuous Moray Eels. There is some great coral on this snorkel. All manner of forms and colours are to be seen from the great hollow 'amphoras' some almost a metre high to great whispy brilliant orange red fans. Tunicates are abundant and colourful and Christmas Tree worms decorate rocky patches with all the colours of Liquorice Allsorts. Careful searching will reveal Nudibranchs – perhaps a red flouncy Flabelina or a striking blue, black and white Willian's Sea Slug. Huge shoals of colourful fish dazzle around the biggest coral heads. There's abundant and beautiful Threadfin Anthias and lovely Charlotte's Anthias in numbers mixing with groups of Kuiter's Damsels and lovely Blue-green Chromis too. In the shallowest water the staggeringly brilliant light allows you to enjoy watching fish so close you could eat them! The lovely Speckled Damsel is everywhere, its orange top lined with blue and large blue and black eyespot on the back fin. Stunning blue and orange Regal Damsel mix with the well-named Neon Damsel and little groups of delicate Lemon Damsels are common. Huge Green Bumphead Parrotfish drift past. Bar-cheeked Trevallies swim past in large groups of shimmering silver. Blue and red Peacock Groupers can be enjoyed alongside Yellow Barred Parrotfish, Scythe Triggerfish, Lined Sea Perch, and impressively large Yellow-banded Sweetlips.

In the evening Spinner Dolphins and Spotted Dolphins course through the water as we head further south to Pulau Tomia where in the morning we'll snorkel the reefs. Almost one thousand reef fish species are known from this area and the new ones are being described regularly. There's a spectacular reef drop off and fantastic architecture including some epic barrel sponges. Again many nudibranchs are possible here and with luck we'll find the splendid Blue Dragon a surprisingly well-named sea-slug! Shoals of the large Bluefin Trevally flicker silver and blue at us from the deeper water. Green Turtles and maybe even an Olive Ridley Turtle or two might appear rising from the depths. Speedy and powerful Rainbow Runners look like the voracious predators they are. Gold-banded, Lunar, Dark-banded and Yellow & Blueback Fusiliers fill the waters with fish. Gold-striped and Indo-Pacific Oriental Sweetlips are seriously chunky fish. Under ledges are Big-scale, Scarlet and Latticed Soldierfishes, alongside groups of the oddly-shaped little Blackspot Sweeper which like to lurk in dark corners. The gorgeous Blueface Angelfish drifts along the edge of the coral. Brightly lit coral tops host Japanese Damsel and Yellowtail Demoiselle along with the beautifully named Reticulate Humbug. Orange Clownfish and Pink Anemonefish vie for anemone space. Tiny species on top included Pixie Hawkfish, the lovely little Redspot Cardinal, the Banda Blenny and Threadless Blenny.

We'll have a chance to land in the local village, a good spot for the impressive Great-billed Kingfisher before setting sail in the late afternoon for the bird island of Kakabia right out in the middle of Banda Sea. We'll soon be in waters rich in cetaceans. Dolphins are really common, and we may be lucky enough to see

Pilot Whales, Sperm Whales or even one of the rare beaked whales in these waters.

Day 15
The Banda Sea - The bird-island of Kakabia

The morning will sea us moored off the tiny island of Kakabia. This island is a very important seabird nesting site and we'll spend the morning watching the spectacle as hundreds of Red-footed Boobies and Brown Boobies fly around us. There's also a few Masked Boobies too. Particularly impressive will be Great Frigatebirds, several hundred of them nest on the island. The blue skies will also be filled with terns, notably Aleutian Terns and Great Crested Terns, and the many pairs of Red-tailed Tropicbirds are a gorgeous sight. White-tailed Tropicbirds are here too, mostly off the island though.

The waters around the island as we leave are mid-sea and are much richer in seabirds than those around the coasts. We can expect to see numbers of Streaked Shearwater and Matsudaira's Storm-Petrels. Terns are particularly abundant with lots of Bridled Terns and Sooty Terns in the area as well as Roseate Tern, Black-naped Tern, Lesser Crested Tern. Both Brown Noddy and Black Noddy too. We should look carefully at the Frigatebirds as there's also Lesser Frigatebirds in the Banda Sea and in recent years the very rare Christmas Island Frigatebird has been seen on a number of occasions.

We'll also have the chance to snorkel on the islands pristine reefs which are great Octopus species as well as Scorpionfish.

Day 16
The Banda Sea - Bonerate

Today we'll visit two of the Selayar Islands, an archipelago of some seventy mostly small islands that lies in the centre of the Banda Sea

An early morning walk on Pulao Kalao will take us into great habitat, one of the last strongholds of the critically endangered Yellow-crested Cockatoo. As ever in this region Pigeons are many and diverse. Here we'll look for the Flores Sea Cuckoo-Dove, the regional endemic Gray-cheeked Green Pigeon, and both Elegant Imperial Pigeon and the rare endemic Pink-headed Imperial Pigeon. A staggering 7% of the bird species in this archipelago of are cuckoos ranging from the tiny Little Bronze-Cuckoo to the huge and noisy Channel-billed Cuckoo. Beautiful Sunset Lorikeets fly over and there's some interesting passerines here too with species such as Arafura Fantail, Baliem Whistler, Red-chested Flowerpecker and the lovely Broad-billed Flycatcher

The island of Bonerate is home to a thriving community who still build the tradition penisi boats, beautiful sailing vessels rather similar to our own Katharina. Sacred Kingfisher are sometimes in the harbour. After some time in the village there we'll retire to a nearby Coral Reef for some great snorkelling. The coral heads have

amazing concentrations of Anthias species of several colours and there are plenty of variety of damselfish amongst the gloriously colourful coral heads.

During the afternoon we'll cross to the Lesser Sundas where the Banda and Flores Seas meet crossing very deep water in the Banda Sea in the process. The deepest submarine basin in the World lies two hundred kilometres to our east – the Weber Basin is an incredible 7.2km under the surface, but even here in the central part of the sea the waters are very deep. And good for cetaceans. We'll already have encountered the three common dolphin species spinner dolphin, bottlenose dolphin and pantropical spotted dolphin, further to the north, but here we can find other's less well-known such as Fraser's Dolphins and Melon-headed Whale. If we are lucky we might spot a rorqual or two, this is a good area for Pygmy Bryde's Whale though other larger rorquals are quite possible too. Sperm Whales can be encountered and we should keep an eye out for the rarities of this region – a sighting of any of them would be great bonus - dwarf sperm whales, pygmy killer whale, false killer whale, common dolphin, rough-toothed dolphin and Cuvier's beaked whale are all possible. Sooty Terns and Aleutian Terns are quite common. Those of you used to visiting the Scottish Islands for your skua sightings might enjoy watching Pomarine Skuas harrying the terns under a tropical sun.

Watching the seas carefully will hopefully yield sightings of both Bulwer's Petrels and Matsudaira's Petrels

Day 17
The Komodo Dragons of Rinca

We'll finish in the Komodo National Park where as well as seeing those magnificent Komodo Dragons we can snorkel with Manta Rays and Dugongs!

The island itself should get a mention though for Rinca is a truly stunning island. Just the sort you might make if someone asked you to design an island. Sweeping arcs of sand at the back of lovely semi-circular bays come one after the other, the peninsulas of land in between with sharp-edged ridges. The land is quite green but semi-arid and in areas the orange-red rocks show brightly against the brilliant blue seas. It is a great place to photograph the local celebrity who seems only too willing to pose.

After a morning amongst the Dragons we'll move to the gorgeous little island of Pulau Siaba well-known for its turtles. Here we'll again be snorkelling with Green Turtles and Hawksbill Turtles, and this is likely where we'll encounter Manta Ray's too. In fact it is a reef with lots of the bigger sealife – there are usually a goodly number of Reef Sharks about and also some sizeable Giant Snappers as well as some truly immense Groupers. Common Lionfish flaunt their flambouyant fins above sandy flats where amongst sponges and algae we might find the bizarre Painted Frogfish sitting quietly awaiting an unwary meal. In the afternoon we'll retire to the tiny islet of Pulau Kelor where we can relax on the sandy beach or enjoy yet more excellent snorkelling, as we prepare ourselves for the leaving party on the beach!

Day 18
Melo and disembark at Labuan Bajo

On the last day of the tour we'll have the chance to see the traditional 'caci'-ceremony, a ritualised 'whip-dance', still practiced by the Manggarai Tribes.

Cruising across the strait to Labuan Bajo will see our last encounters with dolphins as Black-naped Terns and Lesser Frigatebirds fly by. And then it will be time to say goodbye to the lovely Katharina and start our travels home.

Day 19
Arrive Europe

Optional Extra Days prior to the tour

Tangkoko-Duasudara Nature Reserve

Anyone wishing to arrive a day or more earlier than the scheduled arrival time in Bitung might fancy spending that time in the wonderful Tangkoko-Duasudara Nature Reserve. The Spectral Tarsier is the embodiment of cuteness, these tiny little bouncing balls are the World's smallest primate and this is the place to see them. Local guides know their resting sites and so morning and evening you can see and photograph them at close quarters as they start or finish their daily activities. Another World-famous mammal is endemic to this area, Celebes Crested Macaque an entirely black primate that likes to pose on Tangkoko's black sand beaches, a combination that ensures this monkey's striking reddish eyes are admired fully! We'll see Common Birdwings, the pure white *Phalaenopsis amabilis* orchid, Sulawesi Lined Flying Lizard, the attractive Lantern Bug *Scamandra tethis*, and the gorgeous Sulawesi (Blue-breasted) Pitta. Indeed Tangkoko has some amazing birding with Ochre-bellied Booboks, Racket-tailed and Blue-backed Parrots, and Purple-winged Roller, however it is the kingfishers that really take the biscuit including the fantastic Great-billed, the diminutive Sulawesi Dwarf, Collared, Blue-eared and three absolute stunners – Green-backed, Ruddy, and Lilac-cheeked Kingfishers.

We'll visit montane forest where cute Whitish Dwarf Squirrels run along epiphyte-laden tree branches as we admire both Large Hanging Parrots and Pygmy Hanging Parrots. On the forest floor we'll find two really fine species in Red-backed Thrush and lovely Red-bellied Pitta. We'll seek the Tabon Scrubfowl as well as the Isabelline Bush-hen, and also enjoy Sulawesi Babbler, Yellow-breasted Racquet-tail, Pied Cuckoo-shrike, Sulawesi Triller, White-bellied Imperial Pigeon, Silver-tipped Imperial Pigeon, Sulawesi Cicadabird and hopefully both Sulawesi Hawk-eagle and Sulawesi Serpent Eagle. This is one of the best areas to spend time with the charismatic Knobbed Hornbill. Coastal forests in this wonderful park support many spectacular Wallacean species such as Black-naped Fruit-Dove, the unusual Azure-rumped Parrot, Yellow-billed Malkoha, and Ashy Woodpecker. The gorgeous little Pale Blue Monarch will be a species we'll enjoy and we'll hope to

see the strange Grosbeak Starling, a weird looking bird that has waxy red feathers on its rump, and which nests in large colonies in dead trees in tower-block fashion.

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