



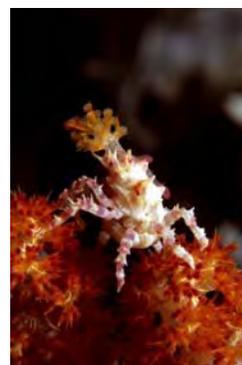
RAJA AMPAT - TALES FROM THE ENGINE ROOM

By Jeanne Liebetrau and Peter Pinnock



'Look after your engine and it will look after you. Check the fuel, oil, filters and water regularly and don't forget to service it often.' Haven't we heard that from many a mechanic? The mechanical needs of a coral reef are similar. Sunlight and plankton are the fuel and oil; sponges and tunicates the filters and of course, there is plenty of water. Only the servicemen are different - fish and critters that maintain the equilibrium by feeding on algae and corals and cleaning out the pests and parasites. The main

engine components of the coral reef, the real nuts and bolts, are the living superstructures - the soft and hard corals. Eliminate any of one these elements and a reef starts to decline. Increase the energy resources and maintenance and the reef thrives. In the Pacific Ocean Raja Ampat is an example of an exceptional healthy engine.



Rich in diversity beyond imagination, scientists are constantly breaking records in this back of beyond destination. During a Rapid Ecological Assessment by Nature Conservation's Indonesia Program, renowned ichthyologist Gerald Allen broke the record for the most fish ever recorded on a single dive - 283. His mate, coral expert Charles Vernon recorded more than 450 species of hard corals. What does this all mean to the average diver on the reef? Well- there's a lot to see.



Raja Ampat has all the required elements for a dynamic engine. Located on the equator it has plenty of sunshine essential for rapid coral growth. The water temperature is a constant 28 degrees and the human impact is minimal with only 48 000 inhabitants. Currents from the nearby Philippine, Maluku Islands and Australian seas converge bringing nutrient rich waters to fortify

the reefs and it is protected from tropical cyclones by the mainland island of Papua (formerly Irian Jaya) lying to the east.



The Indonesian name Raja Ampat means 'Four Kings' - a reference to the 4 main island groups namely Salawati, Batanta, Waigeo and Misool. Even though there are over 15 000 islands in the area, there is only 1 dive resort and very few liveaboards. SMY Ondina, a wooden Buginese style schooner, is one that has explored these waters for a number of years. The Ondina sails through Raja Ampat from October to January departing from Sarong. Co-owner Ricardo Buxo is fluent in at least 3 languages while his charismatic dinghy driver, Michael, makes up for his lack of English with plenty of loud laughter and a huge smile.



"Salamat pagi" Michael greets us as we board.

"Welcome. We go to Misool. Good good" Then he laughs loudly and gives us a bear hug.



The remote islands of Misool are a range of inhospitable limestone structures created in anger millions of years ago by the tectonic forces of Mother Nature. With precipitous cliffs, craggy spires and razor sharp rocks even the hardiest of trees battle to find root anchorage. Many small islands are carved into mushrooms by the constant gnawing of the currents. The only fresh

water is donated by the heavens. Fishermen who venture south in their outriggers are frustrated by endless days at sea with land in sight but nowhere to beach. But the fish love it. They have only their natural enemies to contend with.



"Aros" yells Michael excitedly as he looks at the sea bubbling ahead. This indicates a strong current. We must hurry to get the best of it.

"Satu, dua, tiga," (one two three). We roll off the boat into the richness below. The reef is vividly plastered with brightly coloured soft corals. Whoever nicknamed Fiji the soft coral capital hasn't visited Misool. The dense soft coral jungle begins in the first

meter. Orange soft corals, frequently only encountered at depths, bloom in the shallows. A wall reminiscent of a sunflower field is festooned with yellow soft corals. Huge bouquets of purple,



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crimson, pinks and reds cascade down the side of bommies. Then there are the fish - and there is certainly no shortage here. Phenomenally large schools of fusiliers, surgeons and jacks shoal near the drop offs. It's as if we are watching a Discovery Channel documentary. As the story unfolds, the current drops. The soft corals, so resplendent when pumped full of water, relax - their dinner time over. The billowing waves of feeding anthias stops. Instead they mingle closer to the reef. The predatory attacks by the jacks and trevallies diminish. All is seemingly quiet but a distinctive crunching sound is heard above the crustaceans clicking chorus. A hawksbill turtle is chewing on a sponge. Turtles are on the endangered species list and certainly in Indonesia they are relished for their meat. This hawksbill is safe from humans in Misool but where will its travels lead to? Brought back to reality by the thought, I realize that the show is over, it's time to surface. Michael grins as he loads the dive gear. "Munching barracuda" he chortles. I have no idea what he is talking about, but he is happy and so am I - there is still rich reef in the world.



The islands near Batanta are not as inhospitable. Small primitive villages line narrow beaches against a backdrop of forest and palm trees. One of the islands, Wai, is occupied by the legendary Papa Yafat, his family and Jason the cockatoo. In contrast to the reefs of Misool, Papa Yafat has an enviable hard coral garden on his doorstep. Boulders of brain corals, pockets of mushroom

corals and shelves of plate coral intersperse with green coral trees and long whip corals. The hard corals are not just the standard military browns but reds, blues and oranges. World War 2 wreck enthusiasts usually visit Wai to dive on a P47B plane lying in 27 m of water. It's one of 7 planes that went down near Wai, another lies in 45 m while a 3rd is no longer recognizable in the prolific shallow hard coral gardens.



Energy resources are delivered to the coral reefs by currents. Between the islands of Gam and Waigeo rips a tidal current. 'The Passage', as it is known, has the impression of a river with its brownish tinged water and the cliff faces on either side of the 20m gap. Parrotfish, goatfish and shrimp gobies swim amongst seafans, clams and stony corals. Rays of sunshine filtering through the





dense foliage cast a dappled light on the waters below. In the calm waters of the coves and bays archer fish swim parallel to the surface darting amongst fallen logs and seafans as they search for insects in the jungle overhead.

The Ondina usually ends diving in the vicinity of Kri while Papua Diving, based at Kri Eco Resort, also operates in the area. These islands have the most diverse mechanics. Fish, crustaceans, nudibranchs and cephalopods all work the reef - day and night. Sardine Reef is not named after sardines but for the feeling of being packed in a can. Mikes Point is famous for the huge schools of sweetlips and Mioskon has a bit of everything ranging from hard corals to soft corals and pygmy seahorses to giant trevally. At the



correct tide the point of Cape Kri pumps with activity. Huge schools of surgeon fish block out the sunlight as they move down the length of the reef. Otto, Papua Diving's guide with 'the eyes', draws our attention away from the circling barracuda and shoaling batfish. He points to the delicate strands of a hydroid. Something resembling reef dandruff purposefully drifts from one hydroid to another. It's a pygmy seahorse no bigger than 5mm, yellowish body with a reddish head. Max Ammer, the owner of Kri, is hoping that this seahorse, not yet described by science, will be named after Otto who first discovered

it. 'Whoop thwack sshooo.' A pack of kingfish attacks some fusiliers overhead. One is singled out and with lightning speed they sweep in for the attack. A few scales drift down. Otto calls again. A pink pygmy seahorse (*hippocampus bargibanti*) is perfectly camouflaged in a fan. Thanks, but the big fish action has my full attention. The giant barracuda have settled in a hollow on top of the reef. A blue striped cleaner wrasse is busy grooming the scales of the largest barracuda. Three other barracuda wait their turn. This is weird stuff - the big hunters being cleaned by fish that would normally suffice as hors d'oeuvres.



The most beautiful servicemen in Raja Ampat are the manta rays. On Manta Point tidal currents torrent over a shallow reef flat. This is the perfect spot for mantas to stop and hover. Here they can dine on plankton while having their wings and gills



preened by diligent cleaner wrasse. Mantas large and small, some with dark bellies and white markings, others black on white, some with short tails and others with crooked tails all congregate to partake of the free service. More than 25 mantas can be seen visiting the station at once. As some wait for their turn in the wash bay they perform a manta ballet - circling and swooping

gracefully through the ocean. Others perform aerial acrobatics as they somersault out of the water slapping the surface on reentry to loosen parasites. The mantas are within an arms reach yet seem to be on another planet. It seems real but not real.

What is real is that Raja Ampat is a booming healthy engine with a bounty of fish, corals and critters. The scientists completed their preliminary study in 2002 with recommendations to declare it a World Heritage Site. It is imperative that we look after the 'Engine of the Pacific'.





Info

Location: Eastern half of New Guinea Island, north of Australia

Language: Bahasa Indonesian; English widely spoken

Visas: Required. Some Nationalities may purchase 30 day visa at airport. Check with embassy.

Getting there: Fly to Manado via Singapore where you will need to overnight. Then fly on to Sarong.

Currency: Indonesian Rupiah, New US\$ notes can be exchanged, Travellers Cheques and Visa cards are generally not accepted

Best time to go: Raja Ampat is on the equator and diveable all year round

Water temp: 28-29 degrees throughout year

Topside attractions: Raja Ampat offers very little for the non-diver. Birding and fishing are available

Health Warning: Malaria risk

Travel contact:



www.smyondina.com

www.iriandiving.com

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