





RAJA AMPAT

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Raja Ampat – ‘Reefs on Steroids’ – ‘The Underwater Mecca’ for every budding underwater photographer. However much fellow colleagues and friends elaborated on how wonderful Raja Ampat was for photography and divers, dare I say it, me and my compact camera were longing to return to my beloved Mexico whilst waiting in Dubai Airport in transit to Jakarta, Indonesia. Could this destination tear me apart from my passion for Latin America and open up a whole new underwater world for me?

Boarding the flight from Jakarta to Sorong, a whole new world in the air opened up before me and a new wave of curiosity made me forget about Latin America. We cruised over the greenest jungle that I’d ever witnessed. A dramatic scenery that contrasted with the tiny, smartie-sized, isolated, picture-perfect paradise islands floating in the midst of the most breathtaking azure turquoise blue. Heaven had truly arrived and I was chomping at the bit, ready to explore with mountains of enthusiasm and gusto.

Raja Ampat, translated as ‘The Four Kings’, is situated on the north-western tip of the ‘Birds Head Peninsular’ and is home to the world’s most bio-diverse reefs with a jaw-dropping 1,397 species of fish, 700 species of mollusks and 75% species of all known coral species in the world, with many more waiting to be discovered. Dr. Gerry Allen recorded the most fish species ever on record, a breathtaking 1,320. 283 fishes during just one dive just off Kri Island. Needless to say, the most ever memory cards were packed for this trip.

The best way to see such a hugely diverse area is, of course, by liveaboard, and I chose to join Worldwide Dive and Sail’s new Phinisi-style sailboat, the Mandarin Siren, measuring 24 metres. What sets her apart from the rest of the luxurious Siren fleet is that she hosts just six guests in eight spacious, extremely comfortable cabins all with their own private computers and entertainment systems. And more space on the dive sites themselves! The real personal touch by all accounts.

Our chosen ten day cruise was to take place in the islands of Batanta, Farondi, Boo, Misool, Mansuar and Kri Island in the Dampier Strait, offering the real perfect marine mix of diversity ranging from high voltage pelagic dives, exotic critter diving and breath taking underwater vistas of gorgeous hard and soft coral gardens teeming with fish life.

The first stop was the smallest of the islands, Batanta, which is also affectionately known as the majestic muck diving hotspot and often called the ‘Lembah Straits’ of Raja Ampat. It has many sheltered bays where gorgeous dense, uninhabited forest are filled with an array of birdsong. We were told how a newbie diver with just five dives encountered a Wonderpus here. Unbelievable! Sadly we weren’t so lucky as the newbie and the Wonderpus must have been on a holiday, but we were lucky enough to see the endemic flasher wrasse here. This was one of those few occasions where I did miss my Canon SLR camera with its powerful macro capabilities, as the speed of these creatures was impossible to capture with my beloved compact.

After one of the first of many delicious, freshly prepared dinners made by our chef, Andri, we also encountered a rather lengthy but very comfortable pillow dive down to the southern area of Misool and the Fabiacet Islands. Misool Eco Resort really is the stuff that traveller’s dreams are made of. Enchanted huts surrounded by the clearest azure turquoise water that you are ever likely to encounter. The Fabiacet Islands themselves were a real mix of both macro and wide-angle vistas. I kid you not, my neck felt it was going to fall off at one point from trying to look in so many different directions at once. Huge shoals of banner fish, hundreds upon zilli-tonnes of juvenile

Photos: Maria Munn

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“JUST HOW GREAT AND DIVERSE COULD RAJA AMPAT BE?”

red-toothed triggerfish clouding the midst, with massive table corals springing up from the shallow plateau. Turtles cruised by in the blue, with one juvenile escorting me along for most of my dive, preening himself in the reflection of my fisheye lens before continuing on his journey. And let's not forget the macro stuff here, nestled in the midst of all this gorgeousness. My arms too were about to fall off from all the lens changes I made underwater – fortunately this time without losing them which is my normal party trick. Fusiliers raced overhead with anthias dancing in the shallows. A truer kaleidoscope of colours would be harder to imagine, until we got to Citrus Ridge in the area of West Waigeo. This place was covered in the most profuse vivid soft corals in all shades of yellow, crimson pinks and purples to deep oranges and vibrant reds. Barracudas huddled in the blue whilst friendly batfish followed in our fin wakes. Huge wobbegongs hid beneath the bommies disguising themselves as carpets underneath the lush orange soft coral. No less than ten of these beauties were found and luckily my camera's batteries were on my side and lasted all of the countless photo opportunities that presented themselves.

And just when you thought that this dream trip couldn't get any better, it surpassed everything with the arrival of the mantas at Manta Sandy. We didn't even have to get in the water to see them as they were feeding at the surface. Their wing tips gracefully poked through the flat calm millpond as they cruised around without a care in the world for us strange looking folk. They even gave us an occasional somersault. In fact, during the dive, a train of about eight or nine mantas, some with a wingspan measuring up to 4 metres across, took part in an awe-inspiring display of manta-batics underwater. Just how great and diverse could Raja Ampat be?

We hadn't even got to Kri Island yet, and the diving around Kri really proved to be the complete icing on any diver's cake. Kri Island was where diving in Raja Ampat was pioneered by Max Ammer. I could see why he fell in love with the place. Finally, I had found a site equal to my favourite one at La Reina in the Sea of Cortez, Mexico. Fish, fish and zillions more fish... In fact, so many that once we had descended, it was like someone had turned the lights off overhead. Jacks, bannerfish, surgeonfish, yellow snappers, more juvenile redtooth triggerfish, huge schools of batfish and cruising around us were both white tipped and black tipped reef sharks. Macro lovers were not disappointed either, with mantis shrimp, pgmy seahorses and nudibranchs nestled in the midst of surrounding bommies. I couldn't believe I was seeing mantis shrimp and sharks on the same dive and felt that I was in the middle of a Jacques Cousteau movie. Then, just when we thought that we had had our fill of morning fish, a huge troop of bumphead parrotfish cruised on by, resembling underwater buffalo. Phew... the trip wasn't over yet and already I couldn't wait to return...

And yet there was another breathtaking surprise that none of us had even imagined – fresh hot chocolate doughnuts waiting for us as we got back onboard the boat, the kind that dripped with hot oozing chocolate sauce and made Krispie Kremes look like amateurs. Was there a way that we could kidnap Andri the chef without the rest of the crew knowing?

I helped Michael, a fellow photographer onboard create a slideshow using Lightroom, which really helped to show off his photographs. I had to pinch myself to believe that so much diversity could be photographed during just one trip, a true smorgasbord of life. My ten year passion for Latin America was well and truly forgotten and I was proud to embrace my new found adopted family onboard with their huge hearts and never-ending smiles.

This place is a true underwater wonderland for photographers with breathtaking vistas, deserted powder-white beaches, and extremes of vast, lush, unexplored forests waiting at every corner. This truly is diving off the beaten track at its best and I simply can't wait to return. Mother Nature really has created a dream that every diver and underwater photographer must visit in their lifetime. As Max Ammer, the pioneer of diving in Raja Ampat says from his home in Kri Island, it really is where “all the fishes live.”

