

: ETHAN DANIELS

Raja Ampat

reefs of intrigue

Opposite: Like an underwater wraith, a diver descends into the depths at night with a ship's light behind him.

Opposite Inset: The beautiful, chaotic pattern of a map pufferfish frames its large eye.

Top: Amongst the plethora of life it's easy to miss delicate minute marine organisms like this filter-feeding tube anemone hosting three tiny shrimp.

Bottom: Standing out amongst other reef creatures isn't too much of a problem for most zebra lionfish. With advertised venomous dorsal and pectoral spines, predators are a bit wary of these little beasts.

+ LONG THE REALM OF BRIGHT FISH, BIRDS OF PARADISE AND A HANDFUL OF NATIVE FISHERMEN, THE PECULIAR SEASCAPE SURROUNDING PAPUA'S BIRDS HEAD PENINSULA IS LIKE NO OTHER ON EARTH. THE REGION'S HOTBED OF MARINE LIFE CONTINUES TO SURPRISE AND ENCHANT EVEN VETERAN DIVERS.

A tattered skull and crossbones fluttered high on the stern mast of the double-mast prahu KLM *Shakti* as it cut through tranquil waters off the western tip off Papua. My friend and I were exploring several of the equatorial islands of Raja Ampat, an area steeped in a shadowy past and present. "It's a life of intrigue and adventure out here," David Pagliari chuckled while easing *Shakti* into a narrow inlet. I had to agree – the glorious bay we entered was framed by looming cliffs and primeval jungle.

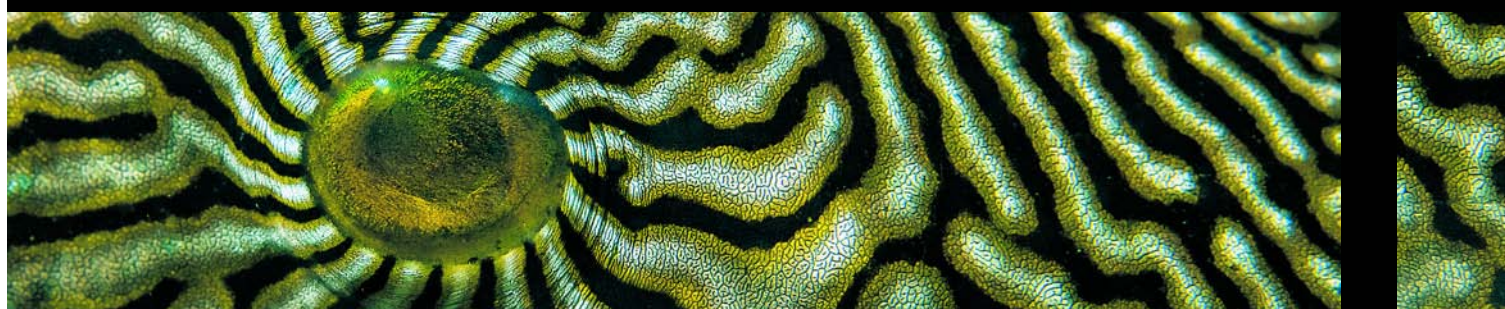
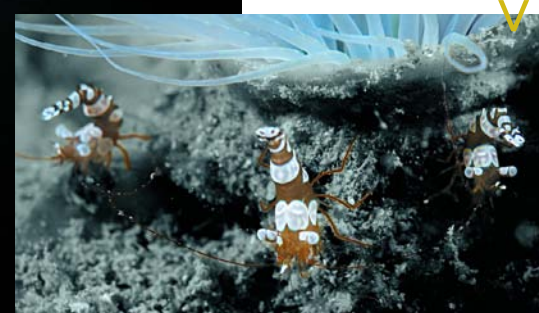
In terms of diving and snorkeling exploration, remoteness, and biological diversity, there are few places remaining worldwide that compare to eastern Indonesia where David has based the *Shakti* since 2001. Many scientists, photographers, and divers consider this area as the holy grail of the Indo-Pacific region, yet it's still largely unexplored both above and below the surface. In fact, the most precise descriptions of these islands come from the writings of Alfred Russell Wallace who blundered through the region in 1860 searching for rare specimens of the bird of paradise!

The sea surrounding Raja Ampat, translated as 'the Four Kings,' (Waigeo, Batanta, Sulawati, and Mysool Islands) is literally the world's epicenter of marine life. The massive species number is primarily due to the islands' location. Marine fauna originating from Micronesia, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea and western Indonesia, have congregated over millions of years in Raja Ampat due to plate tectonics, the warm, equatorial waters, stable climate, and variety of habitats. More fish and invertebrate species are expected amongst the reefs of these four islands than anywhere else on

Earth. The two highest fish counts ever recorded on single dives, 283 and 281 species, were within Raja Ampat's waters. Simply put, the reefs are overwhelming.

Daydreaming for years while peering at charts of Indonesian waters has recently paid off for David and led to the discovery of possibly the finest tropical diving on the planet. Raja Ampat covers a gigantic area, nearly 10 million acres, and has an endless supply of dramatic dive sites. Undoubtedly, a good quantity of undescribed species exist among these waters as well. It is literally a last frontier for those seeking the planet's untainted marine communities, home to pygmy seahorses, tassled wobbegongs, stealthy mantas, and mellow turtles. The desire to stay one step ahead and venture even further to where few footsteps have fallen and where even fewer divers have blown bubbles, is an innate yearning in both David and me, and Raja Ampat had all of the means to satisfy this desire.

The sea surrounding Raja Ampat is not only amenable to high diversity but is also a healthy ecosystem. Along the larger volcanic islands, David showed me vast tracts of mangroves supporting a wide array of epiphytic, parasitic, and climbing plants. Early each morning the bird calls from the forest canopy were outrageously loud, giving a prehistoric aura to the area. The intricate mangrove root systems revealed sponges, crustaceans, molluscs, echinoderms, and fishes in a variety of life stages. The thick mangroves serve as a gigantic filter, protecting nearby reefs from runoff during the monsoon season and as a nursery for hundreds of species of small reef fish which shelter and feed there. Though I enjoyed exploring these mucky habitats at high tide, searching for weird critters, it was hard to concentrate knowing that Indo-Pacific



“It was a tiny piece of paradise, but that wasn’t the end.”

crocodiles, the world’s largest and toothiest living reptile, also dwelled in the mangroves and adjacent seagrass beds.

Not far from there David exposed me to the raison d’être in Raja Ampat, the vibrant coral reefs. It’s tricky to adequately illustrate any one dive site in such a lush and vibrant marine environment like Raja Ampat, but a few have recurred in my dreams and begged to be put down in words.

Backrolling into tropical 30 metre vis is always a rush, but it’s even more so to be instantly surrounded by dense schools of sizeable fish. In blue water at Sardine Reef, chevron barracuda, slender unicornfish, bigeye trevally, and longfin bannerfish formed concentrated shoals. But the substantial patch reef, with its hundreds of species of vibrant reef fishes and thousands of invertebrates, couldn’t be ignored. From a brown-spotted cat-

shark, giant trevally, dogtooth tuna, Spanish mackerel, and giant bumphead parrotfish, to petite nudibranchs, spider crabs, mantis shrimp, toadfish and jawfish, it was sensory overload.

The tiny islet of Kerupiar, another spectacular spot, sat amidst the myriad of islands and swirling currents, supporting a little bit of everything imaginable.

Dropping in on an incredible assortment of hard corals, the reef quickly morphed into a magnificent wall dripping with soft corals, gorgonians, and barrel sponges. Jacks, batfish, fusiliers and anthias obstructed views of not only the wall’s inhabitants but also several hawksbill turtles and blacktip sharks. Drifting with the strong current gave me little time to admire it all, but a field of colossal boulders soon appeared so I hunkered down in the lee with a large school of ribbon sweetlips. Two tawny sharks had squeezed under the rocks just underneath

me but my attention was shortly called elsewhere. Upon ascending past a slope of seawhips and garden eels, an immaculate plantation of table and leather corals flourished as far as the eye could see, a tiny piece of paradise. David soon pointed out a tiny manta, no more than 1.5 metres wing to wing, that swooped in out of nowhere.

Biologists from both Conservation International and The Nature Conservancy previously counted more coral species on the reef of Batu Boru than are known from any other place of similar size on Earth. Needless to say, descending onto this gently sloping reef brought seemingly endless fauna. Hundreds of vivid reef fish zipped in and out of this three-dimensional coral city going about their daily business. Out in the blue Spanish mackerel, great barracuda, and dogtooth tuna, prowled amongst redtooth triggerfish and fusiliers.

Raja Ampat’s coral reefs are unembellished underwater cities of life. Species of fish interact with the world’s largest variety of invertebrates, creating a fascinating hodgepodge of color, texture, and behavior.



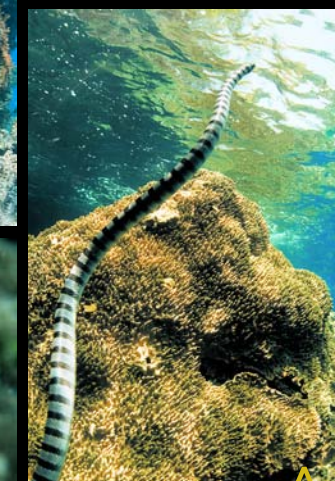
Three stonefish. The world’s most venomous fish is rarely found in such numbers due to the competition for prey



A flamboyant Glossodoris nudibranch glides through the muck. An extensive array of colourful sea slugs can be found just about every dive.



Teira spadefish may look like they have a large surface area but they are quite compressed, more like a swimming silver plate.



A monster-sized female banded krait; these mellow tempered reptiles carry a deadly neurotoxin with which they kill small reef fish.

Like large predatory carpets, funky tassled wobbegongs were found lounging on several large table corals. Yet again, towards the end of the dive, I found myself floating amongst an absurdly beautiful zone of corals and gorgonians. “So you’re looking for the world’s most exquisite coral reef scenery?” David asked, “Look no further than Zen Garden West.” It mesmerized even the most seasoned ‘been there, done that’ diver amongst us. Beginning on a wall smothered in sponges, corals, crinoids, or tunicates, we drifted leisurely around some bends, noting a few reef sharks below and an

occasional green or hawksbill turtle munching on a sponge. Approximately two-thirds of the way through the dive we ascended into one of the most intricate and aesthetic coral gardens in the Pacific Ocean. Ranging from 20 to 5 feet deep, it was difficult to believe that the beauty there wasn’t a mirage. While I meditated on the splendor of the shallows, thousands of silversides encased me in a whirlwind of silver and blue. My head spun! The entire trip went by in a blink of the eye and it was time to head for Sorong, Papua’s main port. As we sailed out of the stunning limestone islands of Wayag, or

‘God’s Country’ as David calls them, we traded stories, lusting for more undiscovered paradises. We also talked about the possibility of Raja Ampat becoming a World Heritage site, which has been proposed by several NGOs. David is the first to say that he’s merely been scratching the surface of what there is to see and do here and there’s a long way to go in terms of conservation endeavours. As with other areas within southeast Asia, the use of dynamite and cyanide is not unheard of, though we didn’t see any signs of their use. The lack of larger predators does indicate the shark

finners long arms have reached even these remote spots. But Raja Ampat is one of the few areas on Earth that's retained an impressive proportion of intact forests and reefs, making its overall health well worth protecting.

Spending a week or two exploring here is a chance to observe Mother Nature 'red in tooth and claw.' And, as David stated at the start of our journey, the incredibly rich waters of eastern Indonesia are ripe for more exploration – learning what survives there isn't only stimulating, it also supports conservation efforts. While packing my gear at the end of our spectacular voyage, I began planning the next journey past the fringes of civilization to Raja Ampat in order to feed my raging addiction to these magical reefs.



magical reefs°



Raja Ampat's reefs grow even in the shadow of nearby islands. A traditional Bugis schooner lies amongst the calm equatorial waters. To be in such a remote wonderland of islands and reefs is to be in a heaven on earth.



CHECK THIS OUT!

Have you been to Raja Ampat? Share your stories & photos on our community forums. It's free to join and there's heaps more to discover there! Visit www.divetheblue.net/forums

UPDATE...

It has been drawn to our attention by one of our readers, that details in the article "Karkar, Mililiat, Bagabag, plus magic on The Planet" (Page 48 Issue #125) regarding the B-25 Mitchell are incorrect. The following details were provided by Walt Deas.

Issue 125 is another great magazine however there are mistakes in regards to the downed North American B-25 Mitchell off Wongat Island out from Jais Aben Resort.

When the B-25 was shot down, one crewman died (Raymond Zimmerman), the others all swam to nearby Wongat Island and were captured by the Japanese except Lt. Ritacco (he was not the pilot) he hid and was later captured and like the rest brutally interrogated at Amron. They were not executed on the island. Major Williston M. Cox who flew as command

pilot, sat behind the pilot and using a long extension cord to his headset and microphone was there to direct the pilots on the flight. This lead ship was piloted by Captain Robert Herry and co-piloted by 2nd Lieutenant Robert J. Koscelnak. The rest of the crew consisted of - 1st Lt. Louis L. Ritacco, the Navigator; T/Sgt. Hugh W. Anderson, the Radio Operator; and S/Sgt. Raymond J. Zimmerman, the Flight Engineer and Gunner.

On August 31, 1943, five American airmen, four from the 38th Bomb Group's B-25, Green Dragon #41-30118 and another B-25 crewman 2nd Lt. Owen Salvage were bayoneted to death at Amron. (For full details of the Green Dragon see the 'The Bomber Reef' DVD.) Major Cox because of his importance was shipped to Rabaul and eventually to Tokyo and he survived the war.