

> TO THE RIGHT, A DOZEN YELLOW-RIBBON SWEETLIPS HANG MOTIONLESS ABOVE A PINKISH SEAFAN. ON MY LEFT, HUNDREDS OF BLUE-LINED FUSILIERS ARE SHOWERING MY WAY. IN THE COBALT BLUE NEAR THE SLOPING REEF, A HEFTY SCHOOL OF BIG-EYED JACKS SPIRALS AROUND AN IMAGINARY AXIS. DANGLING AMONGST THE SILVERY TORNADO, COLOURFUL ANTHIAS AND SURGEONFISH DANCE IN UNISON. AT THE REEF'S EDGE, BARRACUDAS ASSESS ALL THINGS PASSING BY, SELECTING THEIR NEXT MEAL. CORALS, HARD AND SOFT, CARPET THE VICINITY. IF NOT FOR THE CURRENT, I COULD BE WATCHING A MARINE VIDEO ON A GIANT TV.

: STEPHEN WONG & TAKAKO UNO

Dang, dang'! Our divemaster Otto taps his tank with a stick, inviting us to look beneath a table coral where Viola, a tasseled wobbegong nestles with a couple of lobsters – what a small gap for my cumbersome camera rig! I detach the flashes from the strobe arms for a clean shot, but while doing that another 'dang, dang' goes off. Zacharias, another eagle-eyed divemaster, has found Pontohi pygmy seahorses on a gorgonian. Takako re-adjusts her camera to focus on the tiny denizens.

Suddenly the blue-lined fusiliers speed up. A handful of giant trevally storms into the neon-coloured fish school. Like fireworks, the cloud of fusiliers explodes radially. When the GTs slacken, the smaller fish school regroups in sync and confuses the predators with sheer numbers. Both fishes re-quicken their pace, the life and death saga resumes. In awe I gulp both air and water as an odd partnership of a Napoleon wrasse and Spanish mackerel unhurriedly pass by.

I surface with an air gauge reading 20 bars (not too wise to have such low air

remaining). Yes, I'm usually a big air-drainer even on a boring dive. This time, I blame the animals for my speedy air consumption. This is Mios Kohn – my first dive in the Raja Ampat.

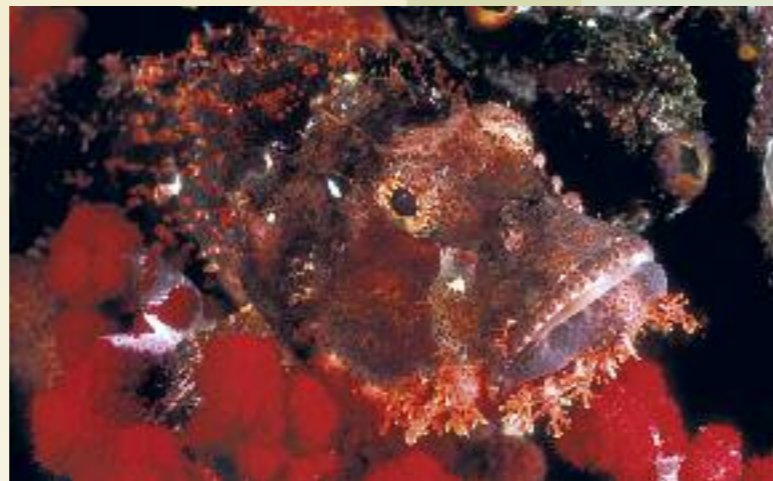
Raja Ampat is definitely exotic. Legend has it that a 17th century Sultan gave the larger four islands of Waigeo, Batanta, Salawati and Misool to four local lords, or 'kings' to control the spice trade. The people here belong to different ethnic backgrounds; the more well-known Danti and Asmat people have lived in the region for thousands of years in isolation. Some

A VISIT TO THE KINGS



A striking sunrise at Sorido Resort; This pontohi pygmy seahorse was camouflaged well; The blue water mangroves & coral at their feet;

A giant clam Tridacna gigas; Manta rays Manta birostris gracefully glide past us.



tribes practiced headhunting and cannibalism, and human flesh was consumed in the old days. It is also said (in a book by early explorers of dialogues with Papua village chiefs on human meat) that "Chinese's meat was perfectly delicious". Later during the Dutch administration, the local people's attitude to eating human flesh gradually changed. (no, they don't eat people anymore).

Just south of the Equator, the four island groups of Raja Ampat, plus 600 smaller ones in the Papua region, are richly vegetated and ringed by sandy beaches and fringing reefs. Large beaked toucans soar the tree canopy, white-bellied fish eagles scout their meals at sea and cries of proboscis and macat monkeys ring from the forest. On arrival at the resort, a grey heron and white egret were stalking prey at the water's edge. Last night a cuscus (nocturnal marsupial) came by at dinnertime, gladly taking fruits and snacks from guests. The cuscus' sharp claws left Takako with a few holes on her fingers!

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Our base for two weeks was the luxurious Sorido Resort on Kri Island in the Waigeo Island group. The resort overlooks the 2,500 metre deep Dampier Strait and Gam Island. Dutch-born owner manager Max Ammer, has lived in Papua for over 18 years and single-handedly launched diving in Raja Ampat. He pioneered basic dive camps many years ago, and later built his Kri Eco Resort (also on Kri Island). Rustic but comfortable and exquisite, Kri Eco's bamboo and wood chalets are constructed on stilts over the house reef. Sea breezes through at night, while fish splash beneath your bed. What a great way to get 'back to nature'.

Recently Max built his second resort, the Sorido, with larger rooms and more amenities – ensuite bathrooms, hot showers, satellite TV and airconditioners. Max, a wreck and Harley Davidson aficionado, now runs both resorts under Papua Diving (www.papua-diving.com). News is that his liveaboard is also ready.

Due to its locale near the Equator, Raja Ampat often gets rain in the evening, but, in the morning the sun usually breaks through the clouds and a happy diving day begins.

There are several dive sites within a 30 minute boat ride from the resorts. Before arriving in this paradise, I researched the diving near the Waigeo group. Here, they have creatures big and small, such as four metre wide manta rays to merely one centimetre tall pygmy seahorses in different species and colours, sharks (from the classic airplane-looking ones to the 2006 newly-discovered epaulette 'walking' shark), wrecks, schooling pelagics, sea mammals (both killer whales

and dugong) and the healthiest corals. Also, besides the walking shark, in recent years scientists have discovered more than 50 new species of marine life in the Raja Ampat region.

On a one-hour dive at Sorido's house reef on Cape Kri, world-renowned marine life specialist Dr Gerald Allen identified 283 fish species, shattering his previous world record of 203 at Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea. Dr Allen and other scientists have estimated there are over 1,000 species of fish living in the Raja Ampat area, while Conservation International and Western Australian Museum have recorded more than 450 species of corals thriving here. This prolific marine diversity is due to the special geographic location – nearby deep trenches channel rich upwellings. Right now Raja Ampat is the richest marine fauna location in the world.

Daily tides sweep east and west here. Currents on a number of dive sites, such as Cape Kri, Sardine Reef, Mike's Point (named for Max's son) and the Passage,

can be strong and downward, so timing of the dive entry is very important. The closest recompression chamber is in Manado, Sulawesi (about a one hour flight plus 2.5 hours boat ride from Kri Island). Our chief divemaster Otto has recorded over 10,000 dives in the Raja Ampat region, so, besides his wealth of knowledge of creatures, close attention must be paid to his dive briefs and guiding.

While still mesmerized by my first dive encounters, Otto suddenly brings me back to reality: "Ready for some manta ray action?" A reality that Takako and I are indeed in 'Paradise' and more is waiting to be explored.

Sincere thanks to Max and his staff at Sorido for all their hospitality and help. See you again soon!

*Opposite: A tasseled wobbegong shark shelters beneath a ledge; This epaulette walking shark *Chiloscyllium* is a new species; A tasseled scorpionfish *Scorpaenopsis oxycephala* looking grim.*

Right: A soft coral garden at 5 Rocks; A waspfish; This rare dorei frogfish was blind in one eye.





LOGISTICS

Fly to Manado and overnight there. At about 4am is the flight to Sorong. Kri/Sorido resort transfers you from the Sorong Airport to the jetty for the 2.5 hours speedboat trip to the resort. Or you can take the resort's seaplane. Note the Manado to/fro Sorong flights need to be arranged by Kri/Sorido resort.

Warning: Be at the Manado Airport for the Sorong flight as early as possible. A friend of ours was with us with a confirmed flight ticket, but about 20 spots behind us. While we waited in line to check in at the counter, a group of locals butted in front of us and checked in (we believe some did not have confirmed tickets). Our friend did not get onto that domestic flight and had to fly two days later to join us!

Air temperature is 25 to 35C, water is 28 to 30C. A 3-mm neoprene suit with hood should be adequate. Diving is year round. July to August may have rougher seas due to the wind.

Though few mosquitoes on Kri Island, it is advisable to take malaria precaution (but not Larium which might have adverse effects) and bring insect repellents.

Birds of Paradise? The resort organizes morning walks during the weekend. Slap on ample mosquito repellent and bring binoculars plus long lenses.

Aerial view of the islands; A rare toadfish tangled in fishing lines. ■