

> CRYSTAL BLUE WATER, BRILLIANT WHITE SAND, A SMALL BOMMIE AND FIVE GLIDING MANTAS BEING CLEANED AND GROOMED BY A PLETHORA OF TINY CLEANER FISH. IT'S JUST ONE OF MANY MAGICAL DIVES IN THE FOUR KINGS. THROW IN A LUXURY THREE-MASTER CALLED THE DEWI NUSANTARA – WHAT MORE COULD YOU ASK FOR?

: GLEN COWANS

# THE GODDESS & FOUR KINGS

Raja Ampat is a group of four major islands surrounded by approximately 1500 other small islands, rocks and cays, all just west of the birds-head peninsula of the western tip of West Papua. The area is in itself known as the 'Birds Head Seascape' and it's a convergence area where currents coming from the surrounding seas merge to make up a menagerie of life known to be one of the richest marine environments in the world.

Touring the realm of the Four Kings from top to bottom on a liveaboard is the only way to get a feel for the range of diving in Raja Ampat, and each part of the voyage delivers differing islands and marine ecosystems. No two voyages are the same as the routes chosen are dictated by prevailing weather and marine conditions to make the most of diving opportunities. We explored the northern region first. The 'Two Kings' or main islands of Wiageo and Bitanta and

many surrounding small islands and rocks (there was plenty of onboard discussion about what was an island or a rock merely breaking the water surface!), tend to be well covered with trees and vegetation, so the scenery is spectacular. Each morning the dawn light revealed a new and incredible vista.

Northern dives had spectacular life. No sooner do you start descending there's immense hard corals, thick and robust soft corals in a kaleidoscope of bright and pastel colours, incredible growths of gorgonians and dense fish life and, on those special occasions, manta rays. I felt most dives were ambient dives, where I could look at the big picture and appreciate the wide angle, but I could easily go macro and still find plenty of subjects. Wobbiegong sharks were common and it was interesting to see these creatures here in healthy numbers because I'd thought they were uniquely Australian. Nudibranchs are absolutely everywhere, pygmy seahorses, pipefish, walking sharks and more.

Every dive was extraordinary in its own right and it's hard to single any above the others but three highlights in this region would be...



# DANCER



**Manta Sandy** a flat sandy bottom with several coral bommies with the underwater manta ray ballet. **Melissa's Garden**, with swirling schools of fish above masses of perfectly formed stag corals surrounding two undercut rocks appearing as small islands at the surface. From underneath they look as if they may topple over, so narrow is their rise from the reef. Below the reef garden some of the great finds were jawfish complete with a mouthful of eggs, orangutan crabs and *bargabanti* pygmy seahorses.

**Neptune's Fansea** is a must-do dive, a wide flat bottomed channel with clear water with either a pleasant or an adrenalin drift, depending on the current. The bottom is littered with small fans and soft coral trees and the walls are covered with gorgonians virtually all the way to the surface.

The southern Kings region has the islands of Salawati and Misool. Travelling into these southern reaches the islands appear more rugged and rocky, with karst cliffs and much less vegetation, but the scenery never ceases to be amazing. Underwater, my impressions were that the soft coral growth seemed more spectacular and the visibility had improved from that of the north. But that may be due to the sites and the influences of the currents during our time here. One of the best things about diving Raja Ampat is there's no real need to go deep – maximum coral growth and density of life seems to

uniformly be from around 20m – 25m down right up to and in places touching the surface. In fact the density seemed to increase the closer you got to the surface, so a 60 – 70 minute dive is easy.

Again it's difficult to choose favourites but some highlights of diving in the southern region would be...

**Nudi Rock** looks so similar to a nudibranch I almost cracked up laughing as we were gearing up – two trees protrude just like rhinophores and on the hump a bushy tree resembled the gills. Underwater this was also a great dive and considered by some to be one of the best dives in Raja Ampat with a steep slope cascading in soft corals and gorgonians. **Boo** has become known as one of Raja Ampat's iconic sites. Three 'windows' or holes pierce through the largest rock down to 5 metres depth and have been made famous as the cover of the definitive book *Diving Indonesia's Raja Ampat*. The second rock at Boo is actually attached to the first by an underwater reef bridge draped in soft corals and literally teeming with fish.

Many dives here are current dives as the many islands and reefs that is constantly channel water in one direction or the other. On occasion this can mean quite a ride – bringing a reef hook and being proficient using it is an extremely good idea. Because of these currents, the corals are healthy and large and the fish



Top to bottom: Stag corals, fish and dancing sunbeams in the shallows at Melissa's Garden; A tiny allied cowrie imitates the gorgonian on which it sits; This octopus was not too happy about being disturbed whilst hunting; A pair of coral crabs on a sea pen.

life so dense. On one particular channel dive, I rounded a small curve in the reef just ahead of the group. Suddenly I was on what could only be described as a freight train ride! I quickly hooked in and waited for Louise and the others to catch up and saw what had caught their attention. Overhead up to 10 mobula rays flew like giant bats, using the current to feed on the dense and tiny life that was being funneled along with us. These currents mean that you need to have reasonably advanced skills to dive Raja Ampat. That said, there's also plentiful snorkeling almost everywhere, so should you decide to forgo any dive and/or your partner is a non diver, there are still great opportunities to get into the water.

A typical day on the Paradise Dancer began around 6:30 – 7:00am with a

casual 'wake up snack' of toast, croissants and coffee/tea whilst deciding on what to place on your 'breakfast' order. The first dive brief starts at 7:00am then it's into the water. All diving is done from two tenders, each well set up for up to eight divers and most dives are less than 10 minutes from the ship. Post-dive comes that breakfast and after that first dive you're starving! The rest of the day is similar: dive, eat, rest, then dive some more. Up to four dives daily are possible, including a night dive.

I'm certain that on any one visit, even on an 11 day cruise, you'll only just scratch the surface of what exists here. Writing any article on such a rich and diverse region after only one voyage can only describe a glimpse of what there is to see. I'm sure there are so many variations

in habitat in the region, that describing an overall area simply by the few sites you're able to cover in one trip is insufficient. It would be like visiting the Snowy Mountains in Australia and then describing the whole of Australia as 'mountains with snow'! Once you've been to Raja Ampat for the first time you'll just realise you need to come back again and again.

Below left to right: A juvenile barramundi cod poses for my camera; The undersea windows at Boo Island.

#### SOME SPECTACULAR STATISTICS: Raja Ampat and The Birds Head

**Seascape:** Covering some 50,000 sq kilometers, it is home to a so far discovered 1511 species of reef fish, of which 27 are uniquely endemic to this region only.

Hard coral species number 600 which is 10 times the diversity of hard corals known to be found in the entire Caribbean and all the hard and soft corals found here are 75% of what can be found worldwide.



#### RAJA AMPAT INFO

**Getting there:** Australia via Kuala Lumpur to Sorong, or via Singapore then Manado to Sorong. Some weight restrictions apply, especially Manado – Sorong. Travel & flights can be arranged by Dive Adventures

[www.diveadventures.com.au](http://www.diveadventures.com.au)

**Taxes & Fees:** US\$175 Port & Park fee, including permit for diving Raja Ampat in the form of a printed plastic disk. Funds go towards tourism development, conservation and community health projects. The permit lasts for the entire calendar of the year in which you visit.

**Health & Vaccinations:** Generally recommended for Indonesia are anti-malarials and insect repellent. Like all remote locations, tetanus, and hepatitis A could also be considered.

**Entry & Exit Requirements:** You must possess a passport with at least 6 months remaining validity. A visa is required on entry to Indonesia, 7 day stay US\$10, up to 30 day stay US\$25. Departure tax is US\$15. Can be paid in Australian dollars or Indonesian Rp, which is cheaper.

**Climate:** Raja Ampat provides year round diving. May-July is the mild rainy season, but is not like other areas of Indonesia. A 3mm wetsuit will suffice.

“ NO SOONER DO YOU BREAK THE SURFACE YOU SEE IMMENSE HARD CORALS, ROBUST SOFT CORALS, INCREDIBLE GROWTHS OF GORGONIANS, DENSE FISH LIFE AND, OF COURSE, MANTA RAYS. ”

## PARADISE DANCER INFO



Left: A vibrant coral trout peeks out at me from under the coral.  
Right: Pygmy seahorses were everywhere.

**Yacht & Voyage Specifics:** Traditionally crafted in Indonesia from wood, she is a true tall ship with sails and all the rigging. She is the largest liveaboard in the Dancer Fleet with a length of 57m. A three masted sailing ship, she is designed in the style of the US schooners of the 1800s era. She features very large staterooms that are on average 60% larger than most liveaboard cabins and each is complete with your own en-suite. Catering for 18 guests with a crew of 20, *Paradise Dancer* voyages are usually of 11 day duration with 9.5 diving days and 3-4 dives per day. **Electricity & Camera Equipment Capability:** 110v – US style outlets (twin flat pin). Fully equipped camera room complete with charge stations, work benches, plentiful lighting and compressed air. A separate rinse tank is maintained purely for camera equipment. **Gratuities (Tips):** Totally voluntary & if you wish to tip it is based on the quality of service you have received. **Airport Transfers:** Complimentary, the arrival resort &/or liveaboard arranges pick up & returns you to the airport. Also one of the local dive guides usually will do their best to negotiate best outcome for



: any excess baggage you might have on your return flight.

>LINK:  
[www.dancerfleet.com](http://www.dancerfleet.com)