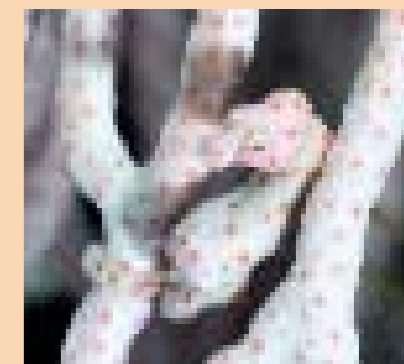
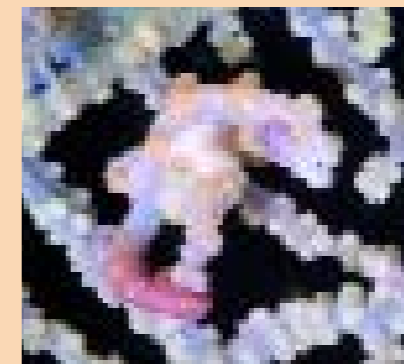


+ STRADDLING THE EQUATOR, WITH THE DEEP WATERS AND OCEANIC CURRENTS OF THE PACIFIC OCEAN TO THE NORTH AND THE INDIAN OCEAN TO THE SOUTH, THE STRONG TIDES AND CURRENTS THAT SURGE BACK AND FORTH OVER IT'S MANY REEFS AND MARINE HABITATS HAVE CREATED AN AMAZING UNDERWATER DIVERSITY.



I R I A N J A Y A U N L E A S H E D

diving wild!

: DON SILCOCK



In 1938 the US explorer Richard Archibold flew over the Baliem Valley (where is this in Irian Jaya?) and saw the compounds and sweet potato fields of the Dani people, who had lived in complete isolation for 10,000 years. Today the Dani are Irian Jaya's most famous ethnic group and their numbers have grown to around 70,000. Wamenda, the main town in the Baliem Valley now receives several hundred visitors a month.

If the Dani are the most famous, the most notorious ethnic group are the Asmat people of the hostile tidal swamps of the south coast of Irian Jaya – the world's largest and least accessible alluvial swamp. Ritual head hunting and cannibalism were central to Asmat culture, but their place in history was secured by the 1961 disappearance of Michael Rockefeller, the son of the then governor of New York, Nelson Rockefeller. Michael, who graduated from Yale with a degree in ethnology, was in the region to collect tribal art and tried to swim ashore when his makeshift catamaran capsized. Despite intensive efforts by the US, Indonesian and Australian Navys, he was never found and there were many theories as to what actually happened to him – taken by sharks or a salt water crocodile whilst swimming ashore, or captured by the Asmat who were known to be waging a blood feud with the Dutch administration at that time.

Asmat culture demands an eye for an eye and being Caucasian meant that Rockefeller would have been classed a member of the 'white tribe'. Nobody knows if the Asmat actually did eat Michael Rockefeller, but in their book *Ring Of Fire* the Lorne explorers quote that one of the tribal chiefs replied to the question of how human flesh compared to that of, say, pigs or fish: "the flesh of the Asmat people was too tough, the Malay's was too sweet, the white man's too salty – but the Chinese man's was perfectly delicious..."

Underwater Irian Jaya is just as wild and undiscovered. Scuba diving only really started in the mid 1990s and is centered around the northwestern Raja Ampat area just south of the Equator. Initially diving was limited to Max Ammer's land-based camps, then Eddie Frommenwiler introduced his Ambon-based boat *Pindito*. A second liveaboard the *Ondina* started operations in the Raja Ampat area in 2001. Both are styled on local Pinisi ships built in Sulawesi using traditional Indonesian hardwoods and methods, a blend of Chinese junk and Portuguese schooner.

The diving is truly world-class and in some respects such as wide-angle reef scenics, possibly some of the very best diving in the world! Raja Ampat means 'four kings' and refers to the four main islands – Waigeo, Batanta, Salawati and Misool, but from a diving perspective Raja Ampat can be divided into three distinct regions consisting of the northern, central and southern areas.

The northern area is centered on the Wayag and Kawe islands north of Waigeo Island and features many mushroom like limestone islands with great topography – canyons, chimneys and overhangs. Because the area is at the threshold of the Pacific Ocean it is subject to oceanic swells but benefits from the cold-water upswells. The central area is centered around the 2500 metre deep Dampier Strait that separates the main islands of Waigeo and Batanta. The Strait is swept by the daily east and west running tidal currents that nourish the reefs but require careful planning to avoid being swept away!

The southern area of Misool is an intricate and elaborate system of islands and to the south is the 1000 metre deep waters of the Seram Sea and further south the 4000 metre deep waters of the Banda Sea – the deepest in Indonesia.

Here are the best sites I dived in the central area:

Mikes Point: A small rock island approximately 30 metres in diameter that rises up from 35 metres covered with soft corals, anemones. Out in the blue are schools of barracudas, jacks and yellow sweetlips. An excellent dive that needs to be carefully planned because of the strength of the currents. It's off the coast of Gam about 15 minutes from Kri Camp. During WWII this island was mistakenly bombed; it was thought to be a Japanese ship as it is nearly the correct size, about 30 metres (100 ft) in diameter. The swift currents rushing past the island appeared to be the wake of a boat. The site is one of Max Ammer's favourites and is named for his son Mike. The island rises up with walls on two sides from a depth of 130 ft. In front of the south wall there's always a huge group of sweetlips around a gigantic boulder. A shelf at approximately 80 ft is a great place to look for small creatures such as pygmy seahorses; many of the particular species of seafan preferred by them grow here.

From the shelf, sheer vertical walls rise to about 40 ft. The walls are covered with small corals, sponges and tunicates. Photographers will find plenty of macro subjects on these walls at night. The bombing created interesting topolog – the chunk of the island broken off by the bombing made a shallow tunnel where it fell beside the island. Golden tubastrea coral, tunicates and soft corals grow near the surface here.

“ Dr. Gerald Allen identified 283 different species of fish in one hour whilst diving Cape Kri. A world-wide record! ”

Cape Kri: This is a favourite site and the spot where Dr Gerry Allen made his record fish species count – 283 on a one hour dive! Lots of fish here and is also where I photographed pygmy seahorses. Though we didn't see them, there are five Queensland groupers that frequent this reef, each larger than a small car!

I sat out one dive. It was very late in the day and a pod of dolphin began circling the dive boat. Once the divers were under, the Spanish mackerel Olympic high jump event began due to tuna feeding below the school. The water surface literally boiled, then metre-long mackerel began leaping three metres out of the water – not one or two, but many! This continued for at least 30 minutes. The boat guys dropped two hooks and within a minute had two huge fish for our dinner! At the corner of this reef at approximately 20 metres is the place to hang and

see the schools sweep by. The current here can be extremely strong and often different kinds of sharks cruise past. Experienced divers can let the current sweep them over the reef around the corner where it turns into a 'washing machine', pulling divers down near the bottom at 100 ft.

The Passage: A narrow channel between Gam and Waigeo islands, only about 20 metres (60 ft) wide. The Passage is an extraordinary site, not only underwater, but also above and on first impression looks like a swiftly flowing river lined by dense rainforest. The entrance is a maze of rock islands that the dive boat must wind its way through before entering a crevasse of towering rainforest. The shady conditions and swift currents create a unique, mysterious environment where soft corals, seafans and black corals grow almost to the surface. Divers drop in up-current and drift down the long passage, stopping in small bays where the water eddies and churns in circles. In these bays are nudibranchs, flatworms, blennies, octopus and many small creatures such as the broadclub cuttlefish. The common (in Raja Ampat) wobbegong shark can be found here too.

Macro photographers can spend a dive or two on the shallow sandy bottom photographing the five or more shrimp goby species that pockmark the slope with their holes. An underwater arch and two caves are interesting features when the visibility and light are right. Out in the current, encounters with schools of fish, such as jacks, bumphead parrotfish and black and whitetip sharks, barracuda, turtles and rays are common.

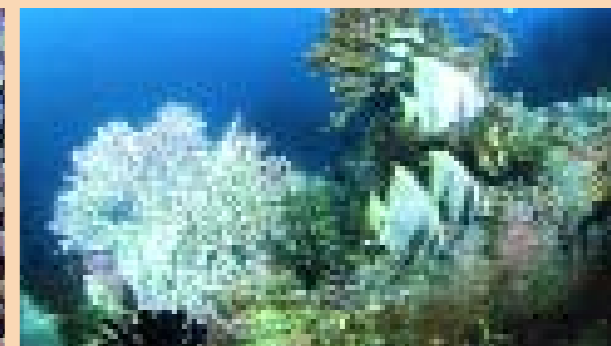
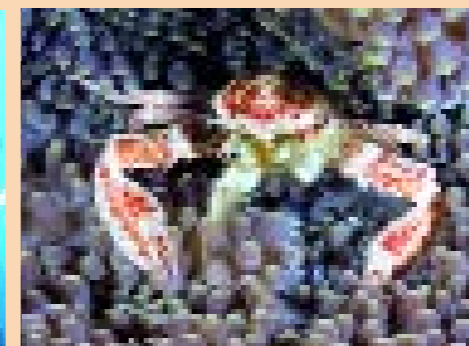
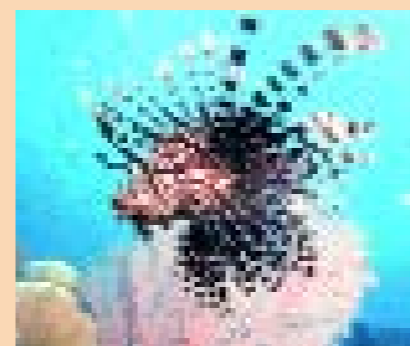
Melissa's Garden: Named after pioneers Max and Anita Ammer's daughter, Melissa's Garden is a reef flat in the Gam island group with three small rock islands surrounded by an extraordinary reef 'garden' of rainbow hard and soft corals. The islands are undercut and mushroom-shaped. The walls of the islands are carpeted with a profusion of tunicates in literally every colour imaginable plus soft corals and seafans in unbelievable pastels. The reef flat itself is mainly between six and eight metres so one has a lot of time to explore!

Not only are the corals remarkable but the area is also covered with fish. Between the many boulders one can find sleeping sharks and if lucky, a giant Queensland grouper. The flat also has quite a number of giant clams which are getting rare in other parts of the world and are probably 100 plus years old. Photographers are advised to dive this location with at least some current running as the many soft corals are under those conditions at their best. This dive has so many fishes that a great coral composition is easy.

Sardine Reef: One of the best fish dives possible anywhere! A large offshore reef, 20 ft sloping down to 80 ft with coral bommies on the slope covered with many species of dendronephya corals, seafans, large orange sponges and crinoids. Divers are dropped at

the Cape (point) of the reef where large schools of fish congregate in the backwash where the current hits the reef and splits. On the point you'll find large schools of batfish, schools of barracuda (three species), bannerfish schools, schools of jacks, schools of snappers (several species), schools of fusiliers (three to four species), and schools of surgeonfish (two species). Around the bommies four species of sweetlips, sometimes a dozen or more of each, huddle together. There are simply so many fish here at times that you may not be able to see your buddy unless you stay very close together! Clown triggerfish, Moorish idols, parrotfish, squirrelfish, anemonefish and others inhabit the area. Some overhangs have dense schools of golden sweepers inside. Wobbegong sharks are found near the bottom on nearly every dive. Large bumphead parrotfish feed at the top of the reef and may be approached if divers are stealthy. This is a good area for video and wide angle or fish photography.

DR. GERALD R. ALLEN: On his first visit with Irian Diving (now Papua Diving) Dr Allen of the Western Australian Museum in Perth, Australia, stated in a report for Conservation International "that the reefs were among the best he'd ever seen and that he'd never seen so many big fish during any of his previous visits in Indonesia". Gerald Allen is the author of 25-plus marine life books. During his last visit he recorded 283 different species of fish during ONE dive, a worldwide record! Dr Allen made this amazing record while diving Cape Kri which is their home reef!



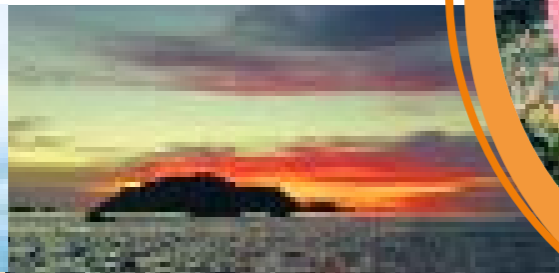


out there°

The Indonesian archipelago stretches some 5,000 km from Bandeh Aceh in the west, to Irian Jaya in the east and consists of over 13,000 inhabited islands and an estimated further 5,000 uninhabited ones. Home to over 220 million people, Indonesia is an incredibly interesting & diverse country with many things to see & do, but underwater Indonesia is widely acknowledged as the epicenter of marine diversity, with over 4,000 identified species - compared to around 1,000 in the Red Sea and 400 in the Caribbean.

Occupying the eastern half of the island on New Guinea, the second largest island in the world, Irian Jaya is one of the most remote areas in Indonesia. With an area of 410,660 square kilometers, roughly half the size of New South Wales, but a total population of less than 2 million people, parts of Irian Jaya are so remote that some of the inhabitants were only discovered less than 50 years ago.

Over 250 unique languages are spoken in Irian Jaya – indigenous people are dark skinned with kinky hair, hence the Malay word 'Papua' for kinky, and can trace their ancestry back to the expansion of Malays through Indonesia.



Raja Ampat Logistics

Getting There: Sorong is the town you need to get to for either liveaboard or land based diving, but you have to transit through Manado. There's a connecting flight via either Singapore with Silk Air, or from Bali with Garuda. On this trip from Australia it took me two days each way, whereas going to Papua New Guinea (the other half of the island of New Guinea) takes half this travel time. Next time I go to Irian Jaya I'll spend time in Manado on the way there and on the way back for the diving at Bunaken and Lembeh to make the most of it! I used Jeremy Barnes of Safari Travel in Manado for my overnight accommodation and connecting flights and thoroughly recommend him.

Visas: You can either visit the Indonesian Consulate in Maroubra (Sydney, Australia) in person, dropping off your passport plus fee and picking it up four days later, or posting it with a stamped self-addressed return envelope. Or you can get off the plane at Manado and elbow your way to the front of the 'Visa On Arrival' queue and pay US\$25. My advice is get the visa in advance and save the hassle on arrival.

When To Go: The seas are roughest and the visibility worst in mid June through to the end of August. During the rest of the year the seas are smooth with good visibility; our trip was timed to coincide with the peak conditions in October/November.

SMY Ondina:

I spent 11 days diving the central and southern areas of Raja Ampat on board the SMY Ondina, completing a total of 43 dives. I was thoroughly impressed with both the diving and the boat and from a photographic viewpoint this was probably the most productive trip I've ever done! The boat crew and cruise director Ricard Buxo are very knowledgeable and take you to the best spots in each location. These are dived more than once so it was just great to get back on the boat, download images to check results and then go back in to get 'that shot'.

Facilities: The Ondina is a 32 metre vessel designed specifically for scuba diving. The crew have over five years experience chartering cruises throughout Indonesia. The ship features an enclosed dive deck, wetsuit storage, three dive tenders, freshwater camera rinse tanks, charging stations for each guest, PC with burner and satellite international phone. It has a maximum capacity of 12 guests with fully airconditioned cabins, hot showers, entertainment setup and massage available. Three full course cooked meals are provided daily, with snacks available at any time. Usual charters run for twelve days, eleven nights. Bookings are essential.

Contact: For more information about charters please visit www.cityseahorse.com