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**YOU'VE SEEN IT ALL?  
YOU HAVEN'T  
DIVED WILD!**

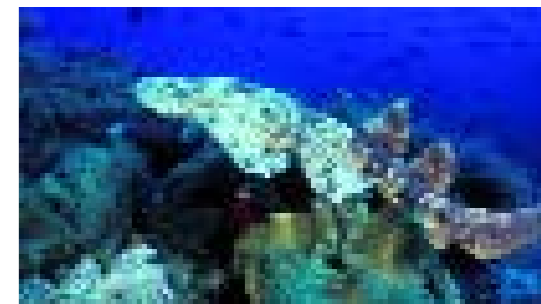
**DESCENDING THROUGH SWIRLS OF FUSILIERS AND SURGEONFISH, I KNEW THIS PLACE WAS SPECIAL – THE REEF HAD HUGE SOFT CORALS AND MASSIVE GORGONIANS, HARD CORALS, CRINOIDS, SPONGES AND TUNICATES, PLUS CONSTANTLY STREAMING REEF FISH. BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE HERE – BIG FISH! LARGE CORAL TROUT WERE EVERYWHERE AND SPANISH MACKEREL, GIANT TREVALLY, OR BUMPHHEAD PARROTFISH SCHOOLS WERE VISITING. IT WAS A PULSATING, COMPLETE, THRIVING MARINE COMMUNITY – AND THIS REEF WAS SURROUNDED BY DOZENS MORE JUST LIKE THIS!**

**W**hy does Raja Ampat have such an amazing variety of marine life? It's between Indonesia, Philippines and Solomon Islands, an area long known for great marine biodiversity. Though parts of the region are influenced by deep water, most of Raja Ampat is less than 45 metres with prime fringing reefs, vertical walls, isolated pinnacles and coral gardens, all with diverse inhabitants. What's more, the region's healthy mangrove forests and seagrass beds are nurseries for a tremendous range of marine life. This area ranks among the world's most diverse marine ecosystems and one of the most visually enticing.

Raja Ampat – liveaboard or land-based? Boats are hard to beat; they're mobile, no time is wasted reaching dive sites and large areas can be explored relatively quickly. But even serious divers spend many hours above the surface, which is where land-based options really shine – spacious accommodations, increased privacy and terra firma are compelling. Considering the time, effort and money required to reach such a remote spot, it makes sense to see as much as possible, so I decided to try do it all!

Sorong airport was predictably 'third world' but the smiling, uniformed Kararu crew made transfers effortless. One of Kararu's three Western owners accompanies every trip because they all genuinely love diving and Sascha Dambach greeted us onboard; after a welcome drink and quick orientation, the engine rumbled to life. Overnight steaming brought us to the large island of Misool. Like much of Raja Ampat, it has clusters of small jungle-clad islets in a labyrinth of turquoise channels occasionally interrupted by small white-sand beaches. In many places wave action has eroded the islets' sheer limestone walls to create intriguing caverns and overhangs at water level. The ship's bell announced dive time; after a general briefing cruise directors Karl Klingeler and Linda Johnston showed a site map and reviewed particulars of the upcoming dive, including lens suggestions for photographers. A maximum of six divers and one divemaster were assigned to each of the large twin-engine aluminium skiffs, which stayed on site for each dive.

While the first dive was a check-out, it was also a healthy and beautiful site – steep sloping terrain with boulders and table corals, fields of leather coral and large gorgonians. Countless varieties of wrasse, damselfish and butterflyfish scurried about while pairs of six-band and yellow-mask angelfish patrolled. For nearly an hour I was captivated by a brilliant magenta dottyback playing hide and seek with my camera. Later dives around Misool were similar but even more scenic with caverns, pinnacles and dropoffs covered in sponges, crinoids and rich soft corals with vibrantly hued reef dwellers and sleek silver hunters like bonito and barracuda.





Next stop was a channel network separating islet clusters near the large island of Waigeo. Underwater scenery ranged from attractive to downright spectacular with brilliant corals growing inches from the surface. One unforgettable spot had lavender and chartreuse soft corals, yellow and red gorgonians and carpets of orange cup corals lit by sunlight filtered by overhanging tree branches. This imagery is the essence of Raja Ampat's unique beauty and typical of many sites here.

I'd have been happy shooting wide angle for the trip, but unseasonably grey skies forced me to break out my macro lens and the macro world produced seemingly limitless critters – helmetshield slugs, nudibranchs, flatworms, fire urchins with zebra crabs, plus a rainbow of different tunicates. Kararu's longtime divemaster Gusti amazed us all with his talent for finding elusive creatures like miniscule pygmy seahorses and bobtail squid, but at some sites like Pohon Mati almost everyone found unusual animals without help. Crustacean Crazy for example, delivered tiny shrimp on wispy anemone tentacles, squat lobsters among crinoid arms and hairy red orangutan crabs in lime green solitary corals. This site is superb. On one dive I spent 122 minutes without passing five metres!

After a few days around Waigeo, an overnight steam took us to Kawe, an island group straddling the equator where we dived a large cavern inhabited by several 'disco clams', crimson red bivalves that emit waves of electric blue light. My favourite here was Kawe's Castle, a tiny mushroom-shaped islet easily circumnavigated in one dive. A nearly perfect cylinder of coral-encrusted limestone, the wall split into a small canyon at 12 metres, sheltering a dense school of yellowmask surgeonfish and several massive trevally, plus many nudibranchs and other invertebrates.

Heading south for Keruo Island, we dived one of the healthiest hard coral reefs I've seen. Named after Max Ammer's daughter, Melissa's Garden consists of three small islets in the middle of an extensive coral garden. Some areas were dominated by huge table corals, others by staghorn fields, but the entire reef buzzed with fish. Thick schools of fusiliers milled about, with trevallies and jobfish patrolling the perimeter. An ever-changing assortment of reef fish included blue-girdle and emperor angelfish, palette surgeonfish plus a

#### WRECK-RICH

This region also has numerous WWII wrecks. Of particular interest is an American P47D Thunderbolt, one of seven fighter planes lost on the same day in 1944. Though enemy fire claimed many aircraft, on this occasion an entire squadron had to ditch after severe thunderstorms forced them to exhaust their fuel supplies. All seven pilots were saved due to dedicated rescue crews and one pilot who managed to radio their position before going down. Locations are now confirmed for three of the planes, and local divers report seeing three others. At least two are diveable, including the one we dove on a steep sloping shoreline at Wai Island. Fully intact, it's now inverted at 27 metres and hosts diverse marine life.



pair of clown triggerfish. My highlight was a large tassled wobbegong.

There was more to come, including a muck dive at Batanta Island and an amazing manta cleaning station. My last dive with Kararu was outstanding: the current-swept point Cape Kri. This reef had healthy hard corals, big gorgonians, large and abundant soft corals, big schools of rudderfish, fusiliers, surgeonfish and trevally, occasional hawksbill turtles and blacktip reef sharks, plus a fantastic variety of reef fish. Cape Kri is where Dr Gerry Allen made his record-breaking fish count, earning it the distinction of the greatest fish diversity on the planet! This biodiversity is fabulous diving, but became a problem when logging dives – with so many species it was impossible to keep track; it seemed easier to note what hadn't been seen! One dive here wasn't enough but Kararu had to move on. After quick farewells the crew loaded my gear in the tender and we headed ashore.

My welcome at Sorido Bay Resort was warm. Once on the dock staff helped with bags and led me to my bungalow. A cold fruit drink and snacks followed fast and I settled in easily. This excellent service extended to the diving as well; I never carried a single piece of gear and fresh towels, cold water and snacks were on after every dive. I was busting to get in the water. At the appointed time, one of Sorido Bay's two dive boats was at the dock, a roomy 11 metre fiberglass with twin outboards and ample shelter from sun and spray. I had the boat to myself so I asked for Cape Kri, so close that a boat's hardly needed! While a few sites are fairly distant, many great reefs are only 3-10 minutes from the dock. Cape Kri was just as great as before and I dived it several times.

Sardine Reef, a sloping ridge in open water, absolutely hummed. On entry we were surrounded by surgeonfish and batfish schools, while snappers and goatfish swarmed just above the reef. Waves of fusiliers bolted past chased by gangs of bluefin trevally and dottooth tuna. Overhead half a dozen mobula rays worked the brisk current. The schooling action was intense, but I did a little reef exploration and quickly found some of the biggest and most spectacular soft corals and gorgonians I've encountered anywhere. Topping it off, a school of huge bumphead parrotfish coasted in during my safety stop – wish I'd chosen wide angle instead of macro!

Another lively spot is Mike's Point, a tiny button attracting all kinds of marine life. We followed sloping hard coral reef to a large overhang at 15 metres where the terrain drops vertically to 27 metres. Over the edge was a massive school of snappers and sweetlips. Closer to the bottom we found an unusually pale robust ghost pipefish with tiny red spots and several pygmy seahorses I'd have missed without veteran guides Otto and Nixon. Raja Ampat may prove to be the world's best locale for pygmies, with at least three and possibly even five species. They're far more abundant here than anywhere else I've been – a dozen or more individuals of several species are commonly seen on a single dive! The marine life at depth was excellent, but I loved the shallows. At seven metres and less, a vast expanse of leather coral covers one side of the reef, while groves of staghorn and table corals dominate the other, accented by dozens of bulb-tipped anemones and resident anemonefish. There are many large undamaged red and yellow gorgonians growing nearly to the surface.





Raja Ampat isn't known for big animals, but one site compares easily with the world's best for mantas. A shallow reef bordered by a sloping dropoff, Manta Point is best in a brisk current, prompting many divers to use reef hooks. In such conditions, the rays actually queue up in the shallows taking turns being serviced by resident cleaner wrasses. It's rare not to see at least one manta and it's not unusual to see 10 or more on a single dive. On our dive six of these giants showed up, including one all black animal with two white sharksuckers on its belly.



Saturdays are non-diving days at Papua Diving so it's a perfect chance to off-gas and enjoy the terrestrial world. You can simply relax at the resort, but there are also excellent topside excursions, including trips to see stunning waterfalls, bat caves, and the rare red bird of paradise, plus cultural experiences like wood carving and village visits.

Papua Diving and Kararu Dive Voyages each have their own distinctive personality but they also have much in common. Each offers similar diving and spectacular surroundings, along with ample expertise and local knowledge. Both operations are very photo-friendly, offering spacious rinse tanks, charging stations, computers with Photoshop, and a good selection of marine life books. Both operators have a commitment to quality and safety, plus a dedication to protecting this unique and fragile environment. And staff at both have a warm, helpful attitude.

Before I knew it the days and weeks had flown. I'd done some incredible dives, yet I missed the famously scenic, critter-rich pass between Waigeo and Gam Island known as The Passage. With so vast an area there's no way to see it all on one trip, even an extended one like mine. But that brings even more incentive to return... as if any more motivation were needed!

Raja Ampat's reefs are not totally pristine, but damaged areas are very few and far between. There's almost no plastic trash, and relatively little fishing pressure. Overall the reefs are extremely healthy, and biodiversity is as good as it gets. As Dr. Gerald Allen says, "Raja Ampat sets the standard by which all other reefs will be measured and should be protected at all costs"! Conservation groups are unanimous in their agreement, and the region is currently under consideration for World Heritage Site status.

If you're serious about seeing the world's best dive areas, it's not a question of if but **when** you'll visit Raja Ampat. Whether you're inclined towards liveaboard or shorebased diving, you're in for a real treat. If time and budget allow, try the land and sea approach. Regardless of your preferred style, Raja Ampat is a unique natural wonder that deserves a place at the top of your dive-travel wish list.

The author would like to express special thanks to KARARU DIVE VOYAGES and PAPUA DIVING.

## RAJA EMPAT FACTFILE

Even in the 1800s, noted naturalist and Charles Darwin contemporary Alfred Wallace recognised the extraordinary biodiversity of Raja Ampat. Though more interested in the terrestrial realm than the sea, he still commented on the striking beauty and unique characteristics of this region. Little marine research has been focused here since Wallace's time, but in April 2001 an expedition led by Conservation International and the Western Australian Museum recorded a remarkable 456 species of coral in Raja Ampat – over half the world's total and more than any other comparably-sized area in the world. Mollusc diversity was also exceptional, with 699 species recorded, more than any previous expedition. Fish surveys? 970 known species were identified and a probable total of more than 1000 species for the region. One of the world's leading fish experts Dr Gerald Allen smashed his own world record twice during the same expedition for fish species recorded on a single dive, with counts of 281 and 283 which equates to an average of one species every five seconds throughout the dive! In 2002 another survey led by The Nature Conservancy came to similar conclusions. According to TNC, "Some of the world's most experienced tropical marine scientists... confirmed that Raja Empat contains the richest coral reefs in the world."

Raja Ampat is remote. Sandwiched between mainland West Papua and Indonesia's celebrated Spice Islands are roughly 600 small islands and four larger ones (Waigeo, Batanta, Salawati and Misool), collectively known as Raja Empat, meaning 'four kings'. Legend claims this name resulted from a 17th century Sultan who appointed four noblemen or 'kings' to supervise the tumultuous spice trade on each of the four main islands. The spice trade has largely disappeared, but the islands retain a wealth of natural treasures. The Raja Empat Islands were nearly unknown to divers until a few years ago, but were rapidly recognised as premier dive destinations. With stunning scenery above and below the surface, prolific fish life and the greatest marine bio-diversity on earth, this region has almost everything a diver could wish for; even veteran dive travelers will find it hard to contain their excitement.

With eight days of cruising planned with Kararu followed by another 10 with Papua Diving, my dream itinerary was in place – all I had to do was get there! Accessing Raja Ampat isn't difficult, but does take time. First you head to Manado in North Sulawesi via Bali, Jakarta or Singapore. After a night's rest, a smaller plane, usually a twin-engine turboprop, connects to Sorong in West Papua. I flew this leg with regional carrier Lion Air, who proudly display their slogan on each seat 'Fly Is Cheap'!

**THE LIVEBOARD** I'd dived Komodo with Kararu previously and was very impressed. Their 42 metre traditionally styled Phinisi sailing vessel combines the romance of yesteryear



with all mod cons for long range expeditions, including state-of-the-art safety and communications gear. Housing up to 18 guests in roomy, comfortable cabins, Kararu is so spacious that even with a full boat, it never seems crowded. If you're Nitrox certified, there's a top-of-the-line membrane system and courses are available during the trip. Photographers have individual camera cabinets, indoor charging areas, E-6 film processing, and digital u/w cameras for hire, plus instruction. Even the best-equipped boat is only as good as the crew, but Kararu's is outstanding – friendly, highly motivated and helpful, they actually outnumber the guests!

**LAND-BASED** Papua Diving was founded by Dutchman Max Ammer in 1990. A true pioneer, Max almost single-handedly developed Raja Empat as a dive destination. Not only did he discover many of the area's best reefs, he's also researched and located dozens of WWII wrecks, including several within daytrip range. Papua



Diving runs two separate operations on Kri Island, between Waigeo and Batanta. The original Kri Eco Resort has traditional thatched huts perched over the shallows. Showers and toilets are nearby and electricity is quietly provided by a distant generator. Simple but comfortable, it's perfect if you want to be close to nature without really roughing it. A few hundred metres away, the new Sorido Bay Resort offers large luxurious cabins on a white-sand beach overlooking Dampier Strait. Each unit is tastefully decorated with local art and has unexpected amenities including airconditioning, hot water, refrigerator, and well-lit camera area and sink. There's even satellite television and wireless internet!

### PRACTICALITIES

Time Zone: GMT +9 Currency: Indonesian Rupiah  
Water Temperature: A balmy 28-29 Celsius year-round!  
Visibility: Usually 18 to 24 metres

Climate/Seasons: Tropical, good diving year-round. July is the wettest month, October & November the driest  
Health: Malaria is prevalent in the region – visit a qualified tropical health physician for appropriate medications and precautions.  
Nearest Recompression Chamber: Manado, North Sulawesi (so please dive conservatively!)  
Entry: West Papua requires a bit more paperwork than the rest of Indonesia, but Kararu and Papua Diving both assist guests with these details.  
Contacts:  
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