

SAIL OF THE CENTURY

Raja Ampat is the crown jewel of the fertile waters surrounding the vast Indonesian archipelago – a place of untold riches for sailors, divers, and solitude-seeking travellers – where we met a diverse range of people who call this wondrous West Papuan waterworld home.

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PHOTOS PRANA BY ATZARÓ GROUP

A cruise vacation calls for a country with resplendent waters, teeming biodiversity, and incredible vistas; and for many people living in Asia, that nation would be Indonesia. The world's largest archipelago is home to more than 17,000 islands, as well as the continent's most magnificent marine reserves – from the giant lizard-inhabited Komodo National Park, west of Flores, to the divers' paradise of Bunaken National Marine Park, north of Sulawesi.

But if there is one watery expanse that outclasses them all in its vast scale and incomparable beauty, it's the Raja Ampat (Four Kings in Bahasa Indonesia) island chain in the reef-rich Coral Triangle. This is the world's most biodiverse seascape, and a place that, once experienced, is never forgotten.

Breathless accounts of odysseys across these emerald waters have coloured the pages of travel

magazines for years, but for once, the hyperbole is justified. Everything you've ever heard about Raja Ampat is true. Yes, the sea really is that colour; it really is that enormous (40,000 sq km, to be precise); and the reef really is that abundant (a world-record 374 species were sighted in a single dive in Cape Kri). Beyond that, it is simply the most beautiful, serene, and unpolluted seascape I've ever encountered.

Superficially, Raja Ampat bears aesthetic comparisons to Vietnam's Halong Bay, but this is far grander. It is also even more remote and otherworldly. I'd seen plenty of Indonesia's obscurer reaches: I'd delighted in the quirks of Lake Toba, Belitung, and Lombok, and marvelled at Sumba's craggy landscape. But I'd never been this far east in Asia, several hours by boat from the nearest city, Sorong. Yet, even here, in this silent idyll far from the trappings of modern civilisation, was a small population who made Raja Ampat their home and livelihood.



Prana by Atzaró, an ironwood-and-teak phinisi, sets sail around the incredible karst scenery of Raja Ampat, where luxe cruisers are among the few modes of transport.

NATURE'S PLAYGROUND

Closer to the West Papua mainland is Waigeo — one of four main islands alongside the lesser-visited Misool, Salawati, and Batanta. Here, there are homestays, including eco-lodges where kayaking and fishing are popular traveller pastimes. It was at Saporkren, on the southern tip of Waigeo, that we first stepped off our *phinisi* (a double-masted sailing ship) and met the residents. It was just after dawn when we dropped anchor and climbed, in the company of a seasoned ornithologist, to a shaded thicket where, through binoculars, we watched the extravagant mating rituals of endemic birds of paradise — a name entirely suited to the terrain they inhabit.

We saw the distinctly colour-saturated Wilson's and the elaborately plumed Cenderawasih species of birds of paradise, as they hopped around the topmost branches of tall eucalyptus trees, fanning their feathers in coquettish displays. A diverse avian population of more than 100 species flourishes here, including huge hornbills, cockatoos, frigates, eagles, and parrots.



The village of Saporkren winds along a sandy path flanked by towering coconut trees and billowing bougainvillea, behind a dreamy beachfront lined with fishing boats, caves, and karsts (a type of landscape characterised by sinkholes, underground streams, and caves). Overwater bungalows stand on stilts off a boardwalk pier, and a handful of homestays lie around the village. On a regular day, birdsong and lapping waves are the only sounds you'll hear.

But compared to the far-flung islands of the Raja Ampat Regency, this tidy village is a veritable buzzing metropolis. The vast majority of the residents of 'R4' (ampat means 'four' in Bahasa

(Clockwise from left) A visitor takes in an aerial view of the karst seascape of Pulau Wayag, one of Raja Ampat's highlights; sea turtles are among the many animal residents of Raja Ampat's biodiverse, reef-rich waters; residents enjoy the view from their stilt house on a jungle-swathed outpost of this fabled island chain; one of the younger inhabitants of Raja Ampat immerses in nature in this vast regency with a population of only 50,000.

Indonesia), whose entire population numbers only 50,000, are sparsely scattered on distant islands, upholding a traditional culture of living off the sea.

The homespun life of Sauwandarek, further south on Mansuar Island, is a contrast with relatively touristy Saporkren. Local children extended an enthusiastic welcome before leading us through their brightly hued settlement with blue roofed-homes. While the men busy themselves with fishing, women in the village's 50 traditional households earn an income from making handicrafts such as *noken* (string bags) and hats, or running informal seafood eateries along the shoreline.

The coral-rich waters thrive with seahorses and blue-ring octopuses, amply rewarding snorkellers, but it's pleasurable to simply saunter around the village, which boasts satellite dishes, a library, and a playground. A visiting teacher stays at the local school for two years to teach the lingua franca of Bahasa Indonesia to the energetic children, who until the age of 10 know only their Austronesian dialect, which is strongly influenced by the Papuan language. As we left, the carefree kids frolicked in the sea, using styrofoam packaging as a makeshift raft, while their mothers watched over coconut oil boiling in vats.



REMOTER REALMS

Yenbuba, also on Mansuar, is another unspoilt village, set along a prominent jetty among shallow waters of crystal clarity — ideal for novice snorkellers like me. After spending a hallucinogenic half hour, semi-submerged below the pier, where white, electric blue, and silver shoals were my swimming buddies, I dropped in on a Sunday church service — this area is predominantly Christian — and received an invitation to a child's birthday party.

A short ride west was Arborek, which marked the turning point in our journey as we left these relatively populous settlements for Raja Ampat's outlying islands. This tiny community of around 40 families, like Sauwandarek, specialises in handicrafts such as fashioning accessories from sea pandan leaves, and has become a shining example of community-based marine conservation. We could have stayed in this haven for much longer, but the great blue beyond was beckoning.

It wasn't until we reached the Waigeo ranger's station on a drizzly afternoon that we understood the true meaning of isolation; this beachside locale was populated by just one man in a wooden shack. Fortunately, he had company — a couple of playful dogs, and near the shore, a photogenic shiver of blacktip reef sharks, who created a mini-whirlpool as we tossed chicken leftovers in their direction.

Soon, we became accustomed to fantastical panoramas of conical karsts — mushroom-shaped islands with dense foliage — and sandbars straight out of paradise, surrounded by seas of unblemished turquoise, where we stopped to lunch and sunbathe. We were mesmerised by the diversity of life underwater: dolphins, sea turtles, and effervescent shoals of every conceivable colour were our regular diving companions.

Setting out to the furthest reaches of Raja Ampat, we stopped at Alyui Bay near Selpela, to the far west of Waigeo, which is the home of the local outpost of Atlas Pearls — an Australian-run franchise that farms oysters in six stations across the archipelago's nutrient-rich waters. Coveted pearls are then cultured under these favourable conditions. Here, we watched the pearling experts, who come from all over Indonesia, labouring over the gems. But the most confounding aspect of this modern operation was its impossibly obscure location, strung out in these distant waters with an erratic phone signal and barely a trace of Wi-Fi connection.

In this Coral Triangle waterworld, cherished as one of the world's most fertile diving spots, a diver with an aqualung plunges below the surface in the company of shoals of tropical fish.





GETTING AROUND

Travelling around the outlying islands from Waisai — the capital of the Raja Ampat Regency — is dependent on private boat tours, either by liveaboard or cruising *phinisi* ships, which accommodate multiple travellers (unless you are only visiting the islands of Mansuar and Arborek, whose isolated villages with homestays can be accessed from Waigeo).

Prana by Atzaró (pranabyatzaro.com), the Ibiza-based Atzaró group's ironwood-and-teak superyacht, complete with a yoga deck and spa facility, is a luxe waterborne hotel. It can cater for up to 18 travellers in nine cabins, spread across four decks, and sets out from the dock near Sorong's airport. Aqua Expeditions' similarly swanky, 15-suite Aqua Blu cruise (aquaexpeditions.com/cruise-ship/aqua-blu) flaunts a jacuzzi, bridge deck, and library, and launches from Sorong at similar times. Cruises to Raja Ampat set sail between December and April.

Although all food-and-drink needs will be all-inclusive on high-end cruises, it's useful to carry local currency to purchase snacks and souvenirs from vendors along the way. Wi-Fi access, especially in the further reaches of Raja Ampat, is highly limited. It's also advisable to bring sunblock and essential medication, as medical treatment will be harder to access.



(Clockwise from top) Island-hop on private tour boats; the sublime view of Piaynemo in Pulau Wayag, a protected geosite, is arguably Raja Ampat's most celebrated and iconic vision; walking the bow of the immaculate Prana by Atzaró.

As dawn broke the next morning, we found ourselves staring in disbelief at the fabled island of Pulau Wayag — an island indecently blessed with the most majestic, alien landscape imaginable. Karsts sat imperiously, rising like UFOs from the sea. They surround Mount Pindito, Raja Ampat's ultimate hiking hotspot, where intrepid hikers ascend a monolithic, jagged limestone rock.

Bedazzled by the views at sea level, I declined the sweaty climb. Instead I spent an idyllic hour collecting shells on the wonderland below, enraptured by its pure, natural bounty, and walking on sand that massaged my soles with its softness. Raja Ampat is a destination that often leaves travellers grasping for superlatives, but as butterflies fluttered past and waves rippled onto the powder-white sand, I had to concede that this was the most magnificent beach I'd ever gazed at or trodden upon.

Our voyage concluded in the only way it could: at the world-famous lookout point over Piaynemo in Pulau Wayag, the protected geosite that's the poster child for Raja Ampat, which became our exclusive playground for one unforgettable morning. Approaching this

perfect vision was so humbling that we were stunned into silence — until we were greeted by the incongruous sight of a ranger in a smart, thatched hut, collecting the fee to enter.

As it turned out, he wasn't alone. At the foot of a wooden staircase leading to the observation deck, children played joyously, while shy vendors sold *kretek* (clove cigarettes), betel nuts, and blue swimmer crabs at one of Indonesia's most celebrated and isolated locales. The experience was topped by the dreamlike vision of Telaga Bintang (Star Lake), a neighbouring lagoon in which we swam, surrounded by pristine jungles.

It was time for the long journey back to Sorong, and relative normality. But any regret we felt on leaving Raja Ampat was outweighed by recollections of the week's experiences — a journey through a matchless aquatic world that will forever linger in any traveller's memory. ■

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