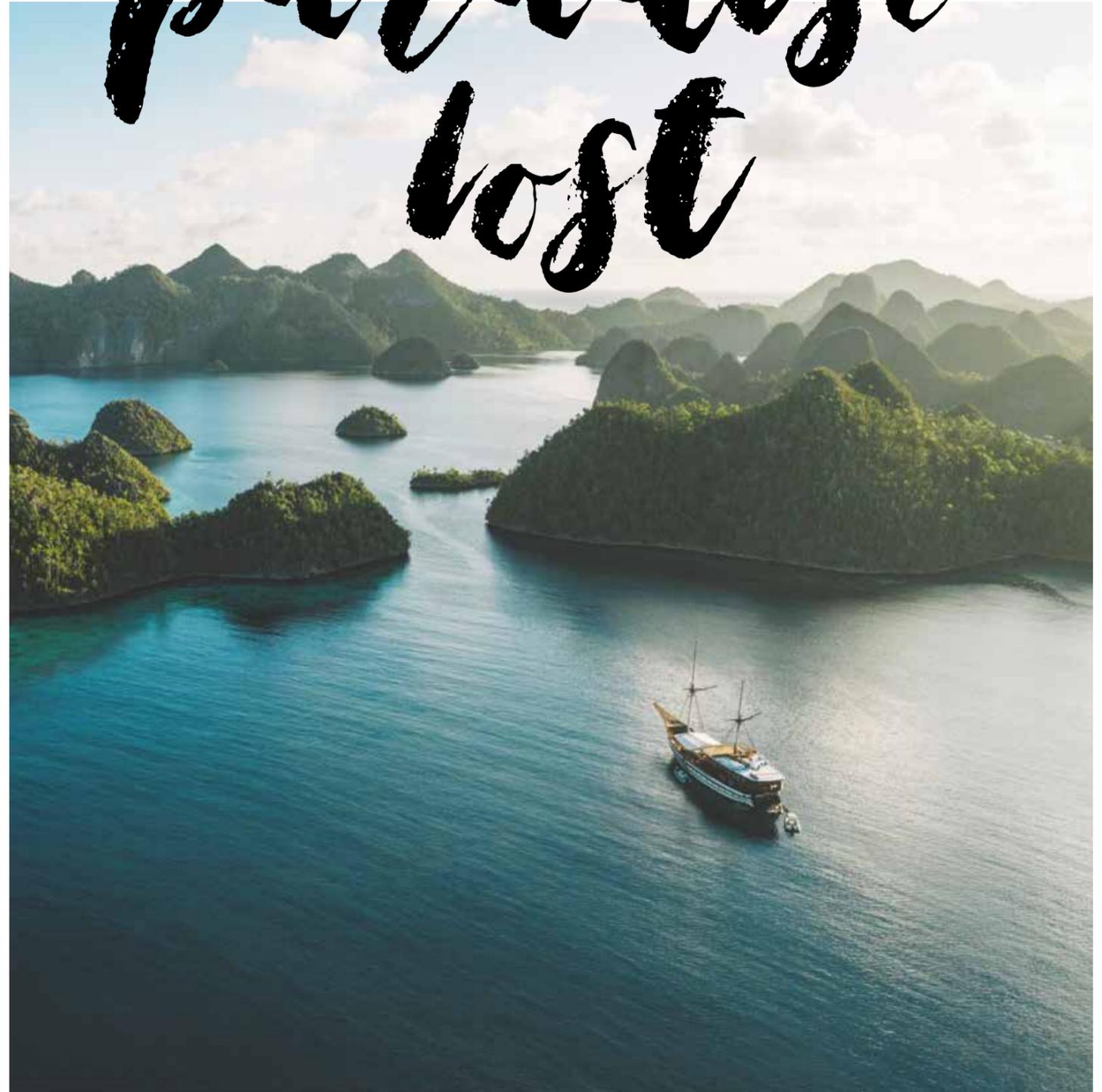




paradise lost

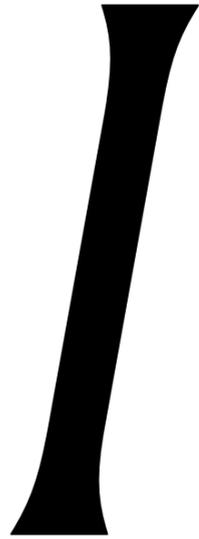


Prana by Atzaró has been created by the Atzaró Group, which runs the renowned rural resort in Ibiza, to offer a similar experience for its guests while cruising in Indonesia. The author can testify to the comforts on board, particularly that of the daybed on the main deck (below)



PHOTOGRAPHY: PRANA BY ATZARÓ; MARTIN HARVEY VIA GETTY IMAGES

Far-flung and almost forgotten, Raja Ampat is the least developed and easternmost archipelago in Indonesia. Mike MacEacheran explores South East Asia's final frontier on board 55-metre Prana by Atzaró



the tender and we pile overboard for the reward: a stirring view of a glassy-calm bay and neon-blue water with nothing to spoil it – no surf shacks, no sunloungers, no sound, nothing. Then blacktip reef sharks start to appear and soon we're snorkelling beside them, a visceral congregation that ends in squeals of delight. What a moment: a frenzy of dorsal fins, sandy bottomed flat waters and a lifetime's best beach. Jacques Cousteau would weep.

"Nothing prepares you for a place like this," says Hadi afterwards, accelerating the tender back to our vessel. He then blinks, as if struggling to fathom the encounter. "Sometimes, I can't believe Raja Ampat exists myself."

As it happens, I'm not prepared for any of it either. Having read up on my flight to Sorong via Jakarta about our boat *Prana by Atzaró* – at 55 metres,

the world's biggest and most luxurious two-masted phinisi – I expected to be dazzled by the destinations ahead on the navigation chart. But not *this* dazzled. No period of time would help you adjust to the splendour of it all.

If you think you know your way around the world of luxury yachts in Indonesia, think again. On board, beneath gaff-rigged masts, ironwood bowsprit and seven sails, the Sulawesi-built teak superstructure amps up the wow factor for its 18 guests. On the main deck is a Balinese-style cocktail bar, dining room, air-conditioned lounge and oversized gangways leading to cabins brush-stroked in calming colours. On the upper deck are two spectacular master suites, one with a contemporary cool bathtub and wraparound balcony view, while the lower deck dips down beneath the sun and yoga terrace towards six sophisticated suites. There is also a watersports hub with paddleboards, sea kayaks, wakeboards and scuba gear, and a massage room. That the Kardashians were the first to charter the \$5.5 million (£3.9m) vessel soon after her launch in September 2018 hardly comes as a surprise.

One more trick up *Prana by Atzaró's* sleeve is Fauzi Gusdimyah, the yacht's chef from West Java, who conjures up regional dishes such as nasi goreng and beef rendang as well as French and Lebanese menus from a salty, swaying kitchen three times a day. Few restaurants in Jakarta or Bali

In Raja Ampat, anyone can dream of being royalty. The Indonesian name for this archipelago translates as "four kings", and there are untold mini kingdoms to conquer: deserted lagoons and jungle-crowned atolls; undiscovered coral reefs and beaches that no one has ever walked on. There's a sense it's a realm waiting to be found.

We're cruising across an unnamed lagoon through the karst-studded seascape of Pulau Wayag, en route to a coconut-strewn beach, and the buzz of our tender is the only sign of human life. There's rarely much traffic in Raja Ampat, which lies off the north-western tip of the island of New Guinea. The hazard here isn't overtourism, competition for moorings or any such headache; rather it's a dearth of services and infrastructure (all boats visiting Sorong, West Papua's bare-bones port, are kept on anchor). Other dangers are shallow bays and channels – charts aren't accurate enough and a tuned-in local captain or pilot is a necessity to help navigate Raja Ampat's sparkling waters. Having been so off-grid, in fact, you may find it a challenge to plug back in afterwards.

Our progress towards the beach is slow, measured by moments in which we see turtles and spot dolphins swimming in our wake. This is one of the many ways to lose track of time here. Another is trying to understand the archipelago's world-enlarging geography: it is a jigsaw of 1,500 tiny islands and maze-like channels, all of them scenic sanctuaries for a variety of life. You'd be unlucky not to see dugongs, whales and manta rays, fruit bats, golden-spotted tree monitor lizards and carnival-plumed birds of paradise. Scientists call the region's blooming reef systems a "species factory".

Saiful Hadi, our softly spoken captain, slows



If you think you know the world of luxury yachts in Indonesia, think again



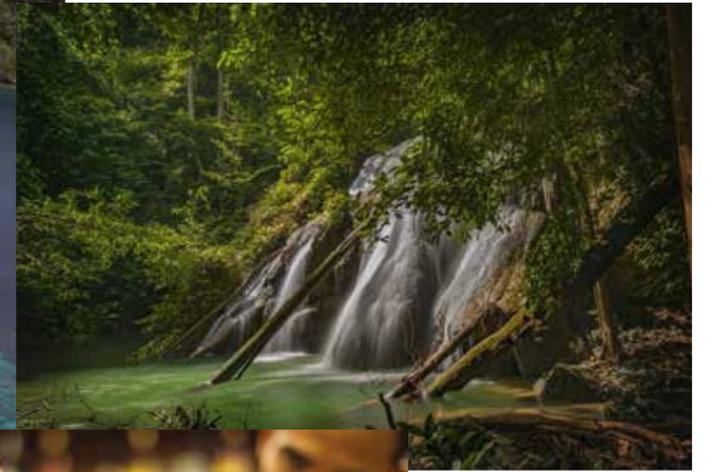
Prana by Atzaró offers versatile deck spaces, fine dining (centre right) and a 77m² master suite (bottom left), situated aft on the upper deck, with its own private deck



PHOTOGRAPHY: PRANA BY ATZARÓ



Right: Palau Wayag, north-west of Waigeo, was the highlight of Raja Ampat for the author



Trek through rainforest to this spectacular waterfall on Batanta island (above), dive to see healthy coral reefs or let the yacht crew spoil you with cocktails



do it so well. "I do what I can to help guests get a flavour of our little-known part of Indonesia," he says one evening. I nod, but really my attention is on the silky prawn curry, buttery lobster and jungle salad that appear from his little galley.

All too tempting, but not exactly why we are here. Adventure is what lures most sailors to Raja Ampat and each morning it finds us. We cruise at a steady 10 knots between angular karsts, lonely sandbars and immense tree-covered atolls where micro-adventures await. Sometimes, the white linen sails billow free, at others the captain uses the 890hp engine to take us into uncharted waters.

The feeling on board is that we are sailing in and out of the days. We hike to jungle pinnacle viewpoints on Waigeo; go sea kayaking on Kri's sandbars; snorkel with mantas in the shallows of Arborek; scuba with triggerfish and giant clams off the coast in Melissa's Garden, a world-renowned dive site near Batanta island. One night, thousands of fruit bats take flight over the island of Yenbuba while we gather for sunset G&Ts on the top deck. Like a David Attenborough nature documentary, it rarely lets up.

First sighted by European sailors in 1526, the Four Kings islands remain a destination that makes you think about why it is that we travel. It is a pilgrimage site for scuba divers because reefs here claim the highest-recorded marine life diversity on earth - a head-spinning three-quarters of all the world's coral species are found here. It is also a Shangri-La for expedition-hungry sailors, who want to live out their own Cook, Columbus or Shackleton fantasies. Here, it's refreshingly possible to play explorer.

The pursuit of paradise is a funny thing for the West Papua locals. For the 50,000 who eke out a living in sustainable fishing colonies across the archipelago, the islands have long been a utopian kingdom, but one out of sight of the world's eye. The growth of tourism has placed the area within reach of travellers, but the locals' priority remains protecting their fragile tropical marine backyard - unlike elsewhere, coral bleaching is absent and reef systems are flourishing. Indeed, Raja Ampat Marine Park is such a crucial source of biodiversity, its reef systems restock others throughout the South Pacific and Indian Oceans with

micro-organisms, plant life and fish. The results of initiatives to safeguard it provide a welcome conservation success story.

Quiet moments on board help concentrate the mind, and late one afternoon I sit down with the yacht's cruise director and dive instructor, Mick Taylor, who has been sailing Raja Ampat since leaving Sydney in 2013. "One of the best indicators of healthy reef systems here is the number of sharks - and we have plenty," he says. "Tourism is appreciated up to a point, but the conservation issue is incredibly important to the locals. In a way, they want to keep this destination off the map."

To help buffer the region's biodiversity, new government rules are being implemented to ensure boats engage the services of local pilots and captains, both to provide employment and to further bolster reef protection. Since 2017, three vessels - 120-passenger cruise ship *Caledonian Sky* and two yachts - have crashed into the corals, often at low tide, causing irreparable damage to structural habitats.

In response, the Raja Ampat Marine Park administration will soon begin charging deposits of \$7,000 for a yacht and up to \$70,000 for a cruise ship to encourage smarter, safer passages through its waters. "A proposal like this is crucial," says Taylor, matter-of-factly. "It could help price certain vessels out of Raja Ampat altogether, and streamlining boat traffic could ultimately save the destination from overtourism."

Enlightenment and endurance often go hand in hand, and, standing on deck, it all makes perfect sense to me. In Raja Ampat, they are leading by example, and in complex times like these, it's an example we can all learn from. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY: PRANA BY ATZARÓ; COLIN MARSHALL/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; ADOBE STOCK; MIKE LIVERS VIA GETTY IMAGES; CHRISTOPHER MOSWITZER/SHUTTERSTOCK; KHACHUIN SIMVA VIA GETTY IMAGES



"One of the best indicators of healthy reefs is the number of sharks - and we have plenty"



You can dive with manta rays (below) at Arborek, on the south-western tip of Waigeo. The nearby Maluku Islands, known as the Spice Islands, are known for their nutmeg and mace (right)

