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MARCH | APRIL 2020

VIRTUOSO LIFE

the H₂O issue

YACHTING
IN INDONESIA



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RESORT BOOM



ALASKA
CRUISING WITH
THE FAMILY

island-hopping, beach breaks, and the deep blue sea

Dive in: Raja Ampat,
Indonesia



RING ME

A staghorn damselfish and (opposite)
Aqua Blu near Alyui Bay.



Discover the riches of **Raja Ampat**, Indonesia,
on the region's first expedition yacht.

BY JUSTIN PAUL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEVIN J. MIYAZAKI

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SIXTY FEET BENEATH THE OCEAN'S SURFACE.



with the bottomless blue behind you and reef denizens scrolling before your mask, it's tempting to simply let your eyes flit from one shiny thing to the next. But you have to stop and watch when a dive guide arches to face the swift current like a fish to a lure and, with a gentle kick to hover above a coral fan, removes a magnifying glass from his vest to view a peppermint-colored pygmy seahorse no bigger than your thumbnail. As those beady eyes above the puckered snout peer back, at some level you know the seahorse has to be thinking, "What in the world is this?"

"People are always looking to see the sharks and big things," the divemaster, Kaz ("just Kaz"), tells me later. "Shark, OK, you see it and it is very nice. But the reef is *macro*," he says, using scuba slang that, somewhat unintuitively, refers to focusing on the ocean's smaller creatures. "You have to think, 'What is that shrimp doing and why?'" to really see it."

When it comes to reef and marine life, few destinations top Raja Ampat. The West Papua archipelago sits in the heart of the Coral Triangle, the world's most biodiverse marine area, which stretches from the Philippines south to Indonesia and east to the Solomon Islands. (The highest diversity *within* the Coral Triangle – nearly

(MAP) KOREN BOLDING SINNETT



600 species of coral and 1,500 species of fish – is found off the Bird’s Head Peninsula, which forms Raja Ampat.) The region, whose name translates as “Four Kings,” consists of the main islands of Misool, Salawati, Batanta, and Waigeo, and their 1,500 surrounding reef-fringed islets. Until recently, unless you had your own yacht and local dive team, you had to trade resort comforts and amenities for access aboard no-frills liveaboards, charter a more upscale schooner, or settle for the limited diving on nearby reefs offered by a handful of homestays and eco-resorts. That changed last December, when Aqua Expeditions introduced its new *Aqua Blu* on eight-day sailings from Sorong, the jumping-off point for Raja Ampat.

A British naval survey ship from the late 1960s until being decommissioned in 2002, the vessel then served as an Italian family’s private yacht before being transformed into its current five-deck,

30-passenger incarnation for expeditions in Raja Ampat, the Spice Islands, and Komodo National Park. Aqua’s first oceangoing ship follows the line’s formula, which introduced high-style river cruising to the Peruvian Amazon and the Mekong: spacious cabins, gourmet meals, and clean lines – in this case, rich woods and brass, complemented by moon orchids, sculptures and artifacts, and a worldly lounge soundtrack.

“Welcome to *Aqua Blu*. You can leave your shoes there,” says Glenn Wappett, the cruise director – himself barefoot – upon my arrival, immediately setting the trip’s vibe. “I promise you’ll get them back when you need them.” For the next week, except when hiking, I saw neither sock nor flip-flop on anyone but Captain Arni Brzac – a typically superstitious mariner who’s never without his lucky docksiders. (“Sometimes I take them off to sleep.”)



Aqua's approach to Raja Ampat differs from that of most companies sailing its waters. Diving is the big fish here: The vast majority of tourists come to hop from reef to reef and spend as much time underwater as possible, three to four dives a day. *Aqua Blu* is for those seeking great diving, but not just a dive trip – a more “macro” approach to exploring what makes the region so enjoyable. Aside from daily diving and snorkeling, that means kayaking through mangroves, hiking to waterfalls and to see rare birds, visiting a pearl farm here and throwing a pop-up party on a deserted beach there, plus one or two surprises along the way, courtesy of the somewhat flexible itinerary.

That's not to say Aqua doesn't take the main draw seriously: Head divemaster Kaz left one of the world's top dive resorts to join the ship, and Glenn (also a dive instructor) and some of the other crew spent years at Aman's Indonesian resorts and on its charter boats in Raja Ampat. But on *Aqua Blu*, you won't find shipmates huddled over marine-life checklists or a clothesline of swimsuits and rash guards dripping in the sun. Consider it a dive into Indonesia's top cultural and natural attractions for the macchiato, megayacht set.

DAY TWO DAWNS HUMID

and still on Gam Island as a sandy beach reveals itself, breaking the tangle of jungle that steps up quickly to a palm-tufted ridgeline. The

distant clap of a screen door sets off a clamor of birdcalls. Through binoculars, I follow a parent and toddler taking the day's first steps, hand in hand on a rickety pier.

This is the appeal of West Papua, where the most popular reefs can teem with squadrons of camera-flashing divers documenting baby cuttlefish, peacock mantis shrimp, and the like, but above sea level, the day moves at a pace little changed by the outside world. Liveaboards shift listlessly at anchor in the breeze, and the odd solo fisherman putters past. After our morning dive, our group sits down on the back deck to a breakfast of fresh fruit, granola and yogurt, and made-to-order fried rice. Longtail boats crisscross between villages of a dozen or so homes, some set a few feet from the waterline, some stilted over it, as we sail for Kabui Bay.

Yacht life slips on easy, and before long everyone finds their preferred places. With an ever-present sea breeze (and sunset happy hours at its bar), the top deck's shaded loungers and couches are the spot to take in scenery and watch for spinner dolphins off the bow. Deck 3 offers a Jacuzzi and two enormous daybeds that are perfect for stargazing with a glass of wine after dinner. The large table with a lazy Susan on Deck 3's aft serves as a social hub for iced Americas from the air-conditioned lounge inside.

A few hours after breakfast we arrive at The Passage, a 65-foot-wide saltwater channel separating Gam and Waigeo islands. It's known as a great snorkel and dive site for soft corals and nudibranchs,



Clockwise from opposite page:
A beach party off Batanta Island; chef
Adrian Broadhead; dashi-poached
shrimp, salt-and-pepper tofu, pork
satay, rice noodles, slaw,
and lobster spring rolls for lunch;
and the Deck 2 salon.



but given that its marine life also includes the occasional saltwater croc, we opt to peer into the clear canyon from sea kayaks, drifting with the current until we're deposited back in the karst-lined bay. Trees and scrub cling to every inch of soil on the limestone outcrops, right down to the tide line, which undercuts the rock. As our group splashes around one karst, two white-bellied sea eagles take flight.

ALTHOUGH PARROTS AND

cockatoos screech from trees, the king of the Raja Ampat jungle is the elusive red bird of paradise, whose males are known for their extravagant plumage and quirky mating dance. I greet the 4:50 AM wake-up for a hike and "the chance" to see one with sleepy-eyed suspicion, yet after we transfer to the longtail boat of our local guide, Frits, the adventure is on. Following a sliver of saltwater into the jungle, the boat dodges barely submerged coral bommies until we dead-end at a dock. The short hike that follows is no joke: We grab the railing cobbled together from tree limbs for support as we ascend. Halfway in, flip-flop-shod Frits abruptly cranes his neck, then breaks into a near jog. Nobody tries to keep up.

Minutes later we top a ridge to find him sitting on a makeshift bench, sneeze-whistling into his hand, eyes scanning the treetops. Frits' great-great-grandfather called birds for British naturalist Alfred Wallace here in the 1860s, and the skill has been passed down through the family ever since. Before long, a bird of paradise swoops onto a limb above us, cocks its head a few times, and soars off. In a bit, Frits lures another one, which looks for a female, finds none, and takes flight. Pretty bird, but for a nonbirder, that's about it.

Just as we're about to pack it in, Frits calls in two males, who size each other up. Frits' stare intensifies and his calling quickens. Then one bird slowly spreads and vibrates its wings, pivots its head toward the ground, and begins hopping rhythmically on the limb



A male bird of paradise and (left) local guide Frits calling to it on Gam Island.

Opposite (clockwise from top left): Divemaster Kaz, *Aqua Blu*'s sundeck, a crown jellyfish, fried rice for breakfast, cruise director Glenn Wappett, and snorkeling on a Raja Ampat reef.

while swishing his rear to wave its long, handlebar-mustache-like tail feathers in the air.

"Daanz, daanz, ha ha," Frits mutters with a nod. Camera shutters snap rapid-fire. There are a few hushed *wows* and even a giggle. Watching the show while thinking of how Papuans believed the birds to be reincarnated fairies makes it all the more delightful.

Raja Ampat's main draws make lasting impressions: Wayag Island's lagoon and mushroomlike karsts that appear on nearly every brochure for the region; Cape Kri's reef, the record holder for number of fish species seen on one dive; The Maze, a dive that runs along, then crosses, the equator. But it's the baby mobula rays – who leap from the water and, after a fruitless flap or two of their winglike fins, belly flop beneath the surface – that make Wayag's postcard setting playful. It's the surgeon's steadiness of a local pearl harvester's hand, or the underwater nod and "OK" from a diver hailing from who knows how far away that you happen upon on a reef that surprise. And on the right day, it's a bird-caller sitting in the jungle where four generations have sat before him, gathering Raja Ampat's spirits in the treetops and beckoning them to dance.



Small wonders:
An Atlas Pearl
Farm technician and (below)
pygmy seahorses.

GET THE SHOT

Underwater-photography tips from Las Vegas-based Virtuoso travel advisor, avid diver, and Raja Ampat fan Ryan Dandy.

- Lighting is especially key underwater, as the sun's rays fade with depth. For wide-angle snaps, aim two strobes slightly away from the focus point to avoid backscatter from little particles in the water. For macro shots, position one or two strobes tight next to your lens.
- Know your wildlife and be considerate: Pygmy seahorses don't have eyelids – exposure to bright flash after flash can actually kill them. Moving creatures to get a better background or tapping them in the hope that they'll look at your camera are also no-no's.
- Chasing a fish usually results in a photo of its butt. Move slowly and the fish will come to you; when it does, focus on its eye for the best shot.
- Bring two cameras, one for the surface and one for dives: You don't want to miss a shot of whales or dolphins while topside because your camera is set up for below, and the more you put an underwater housing on and take it off, the greater risk you have for a leaky seal flooding the camera.



DIVE IN

Grab a snorkel and sunscreen and set off for the Coral Triangle.

GETTING THERE Cathay Pacific flies nonstop to Hong Kong from eight North American gateways, with connecting service to Jakarta. From there, it's a four-hour hop to Sorong via domestic carrier.

GO The islands of Gam, Waigeo, and less-visited Batanta feature prominently on **Aqua Expeditions'** eight-day Raja Ampat sailings, round-trip from Sorong. April through September, the 30-passenger *Aqua Blu* focuses on Komodo National Park during round-trip cruises from Bali, then spends October and November in the Moluccas (Spice Islands) with sailings from Ambon. **Raja Ampat departures:** Multiple dates, December 12, 2020, through February 13, 2021; from \$7,525.

Snorkelers and divers can explore Raja Ampat by six-passenger schooner with **Remote Lands**. Ten-day private charters from Sorong include guided jungle hikes and village visits, daily beach time, and calls at Misool and the Boo Islands. **Departures:** Any day October 1, 2020, through May 30, 2021; from \$20,500 per person for two or from \$8,500 per person for groups of six.

Spend five days in Raja Ampat during the 200-passenger *Crystal Endeavor's* 17-day cruise from Bali to Cairns. **Crystal Cruises'** two-month-old expedition ship, the line's first, provides multiple ways to take in the

landscape and marine world – by snorkel, sea kayak, helicopter, and seven-person submarine. **Departure:** October 15; from \$16,499.

Silversea rounds West Papua's Bird's Head Peninsula on a 19-day cruise from Darwin to Apra Harbor, Guam. Snorkelers and divers on the 144-passenger *Silver Explorer* can comb coral gardens in Triton and Cenderawasih bays for pygmy seahorses and have a shot at swimming with whale sharks. **Departure:** March 21, 2021; from \$13,770.

Divers on the 184-passenger *Bellot* can explore reefs on seven of ten ports of call during **Ponant's** 15-day cruise from Darwin to Honiara, capital of the Solomon Islands. History and culture take center stage in the Spice Islands and when visiting indigenous groups in Papua New Guinea. **Departure:** December 4; from \$12,600.

Zegrahm Expeditions tackles the Coral Triangle's eastern corner on an 18-day sailing from Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, to Port Vila, Vanuatu. Highlights of the 100-passenger *Island Sky's* voyage: snorkeling and diving in the Solomon Islands (including in the world's longest saltwater lagoon), hikes to hot springs and crater lakes, and nature walks on the South Pacific's largest uninhabited island, Tetepare. **Departure:** September 10; from \$14,480. **VI**

(PYGMY SEAHORSES) RYAN DANDY