

INDONESIA

The world's most exotic expedition cruise

The former Royal Navy research vessel HMS Beagle has been relaunched as a luxury superyacht — and it's perfectly suited to exploring the Indonesian archipelago of Raja Ampat, discovers Sue Bryant



Raja Ampat rock formations
GETTY

I am drifting over a coral reef, watching two octopuses holding hands. OK, tentacles. They shimmer with changing colours and patterns; now brown, now spotted, now white. “They’re mating,” says Kas, my snorkelling guide, as I take a breath. Now I feel like a voyeur, but their passion is short-lived. A sinister-looking moray eel, a good 4ft long, emerges from its lair, weaving menacingly between the coral heads. The lovers shoot off, as if jet-propelled, into the blue depths.

In the far-flung Indonesian archipelago of Raja Ampat, scenes like this play out constantly. These 1,500 jungly islands scattered off the coast of West Papua are home to an incredible two-thirds of the world's coral species, more than 1,600 species of reef fish and 700 varieties of mollusc. This biodiversity is so mind-blowing that conservationists call Raja Ampat a “species factory”.

Most of the visitors here come to dive, staying in the smattering of eco-resorts or on traditional wooden *pinisi* sailing boats. I'm here, though, to try something new: Aqua Blu, a former Royal Navy coastal survey ship converted into a superyacht, which offers a commitment to sustainable exploration as well as oligarch-level opulence.



The Aqua Blu superyacht

The 30-passenger Aqua Blu was built in Lowestoft in 1968 as HMS Beagle and served as a naval research vessel until 2002, when its elegant profile caught the eye of a wealthy Italian family, who bought it as a private plaything. Aqua Expeditions, better known for its high-end trips on the Amazon and Mekong rivers, acquired the ship in 2019, stripping out the bling and replacing everything with colour schemes of soft grey and cream, with gold and silver accents, and tasteful *objets d'art*, potted palms and orchids. Now Aqua Blu sails year-round in Indonesia, moving between Raja Ampat, Komodo and the Spice Islands.

Reaching Raja Ampat requires commitment. My partner, David, and I arrive bleary-eyed, disorientated and minus two suitcases after two nights and three flights. Things look up as we're whisked to Aqua Blu from the dock at the port of Sorong in a sleek cream-and-navy powerboat tender. A glass of freshly squeezed juice is pressed into my hand and my shoes are politely taken away as we clamber onto the mother ship. A couple of hikes aside, it's the last time I'll wear anything other than fins on my feet for a week.

Captain Arni Brzac sets a course west to Waigeo island, where our cases arrive on a ferry the following day, before looping south overnight to Misool and back to Sorong via Batanta island. "Much of this area isn't even discovered," he says. "To me, that's part of the challenge and the excitement — sailing to places about which there is hardly any information."



Dining with a view on Aqua Blu
KEN KOCHEY

I emerge from the semi-coma of jet lag to a world in high definition. Sheer-sided sugarloaf karst formations rise vertically out of the sea, eroded by waves around the base so they appear to be hovering. Rainforest plummets into improbably turquoise shallows, the shadows of the reefs below clearly defined. The beaches are white powder, scattered with fallen coconuts and pieces of broken coral. There's not a soul in sight.

Raja Ampat reveals further charms throughout the week, stage-managed by our attentive crew: cruise director Serge Saliba, guides Gustin, Kas and Ana, and a jolly team of Indonesian bartenders who are on hand with iced watermelon juice for salty, thirsty snorkellers, or to whip up G&Ts on the top deck at sunset. There are 27 crew and just 14 pampered passengers from the UK, Australia and the US.

At Daram, off the coast of Misool, the coral beds fall away into deep blue valleys where black-tipped reef sharks glide and sea turtles drift gracefully. A squadron of yellow batfish swim in perfect formation over the abyss, while a superhighway of thousands of bright blue yellowtail fusiliers flows beneath me. At Neptune's Fan, we float the length of an underwater gorge over giant sea fans in scarlet, with delicate filigree patterns.



My favourite fish is the sweetlips, a dapper creature sporting yellow and silver pinstripes, with a big yellow pout. David, an accomplished free diver, hangs out in the depths, looking out for sharks and the more butch-looking Napoleon wrasse, a bulbous-headed beast that can grow up to 6ft long.

One afternoon, we kayak across an aquamarine lagoon, completely alone, soaking up the silence. A lone eagle wheels overhead. The thought strikes me: I've never been anywhere so beautiful. Simultaneously, David says: "This is the most beautiful place I've ever seen."

Another day, we paddle half a mile into the blackness of Tolomol cave, our torch revealing a soaring ceiling more than 100ft high, dripping with giant stalactites. Late one afternoon, the crew set up parasols and a pop-up bar on a tiny island, plying us with Tiger's Spice, a concoction of rum, lime, ginger beer and garam masala, as the sun sinks towards a horizon tumbled with storm clouds, lightning flickering inside them.



Kayaking is a Raja Ampat staple
KEN KOCHY

There's little exertion, save for a pre-dawn hike in search of the endemic and rare bird of paradise. It played a vital role in the development of a theory of evolution by the naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace, who spent six weeks collecting specimens in Raja Ampat in 1860. Incredibly, his theory was almost identical to that formed on the other side of the world by his contemporary Charles Darwin, although Darwin remains a household name, while Wallace languishes in near obscurity.

Torches in our teeth, we scale rocks slippery with moss, and cling to thorny branches and roots in near darkness and sweltering humidity as we struggle to the top of a steep hill. The guides motion for us to be quiet as the sky turns peachy grey and a solitary male, with crimson plumage and long, showy tail feathers, lands in a tree to perform his seduction ritual: head-ducking, feather-quivering, even dangling upside down.

No females take the bait, so we slither, somewhat underwhelmed, back down the hill, greedily anticipating the pancakes with banana and toffee sauce that await us on board and feeling new respect for Wallace, who lived on bony parakeets in his leaking, ant-infested hut.

By contrast, every meal on Aqua Blu is sublime — fresh, imaginative and sustainably sourced by Adrian Broadhead, the ship's food and beverage manager. There's chilled cucumber soup, grilled barramundi, Vietnamese salad and mango sorbet for lunch. Long, laughter-filled, boozy dinners take place on deck under a starlit sky, featuring tuna with sweet potatoes and ginger purée, or slow-roasted lamb followed by a rich peanut parfait under a dark chocolate dome.



Saving the best till last, we anchor off Dayang, on Batanta, jumping into the water above shallow reefs where manta rays congregate to be cleaned by smaller wrasse. Dark shadows appear beneath us, three rays circling, tilting sideways to reveal their white underbellies. They're so graceful, and so enormous, with wingspans of more than 12ft, that I'm almost moved to tears.

Raja Ampat isn't for everyone. You certainly need to love snorkelling or diving. There's no nightlife, zero shopping or culture, and not even much chance to sit on a beach. But, for me, the exquisite beauty of the place, the marine life and the extreme comfort of the ship were a dream – the pinnacle of barefoot luxury.

Sue Bryant was a guest of Steppes Travel and Aqua Expeditions. Steppes Travel has a seven-night Raja Ampat expedition, a round trip from Sorong, with departures from December to February. Prices start at £7,220pp, including flights, all activities and wine with meals (steppestravel.com)