

Raja Ampat DIARY

Well-travelled photo-journalist Al Hornsby thought he had seen everything, but a cruise around the superlative dive sites of Raja Ampat left him absolutely flabbergasted

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AL HORNSBY



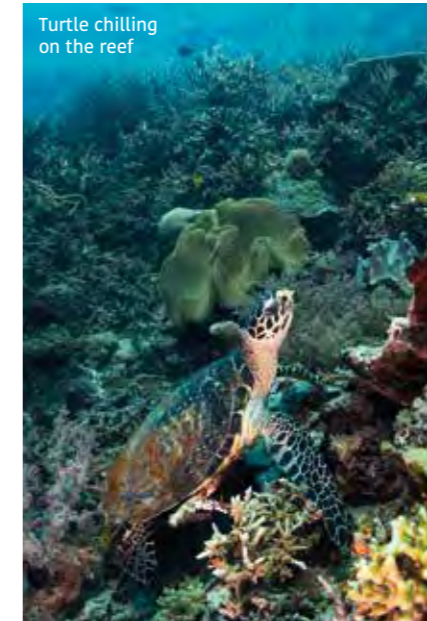
I'm sitting on the shaded deck of the schooner, Emperor Raja Laut, our dive boat for the past seven days, as we head for the Indonesian port town of Sobrong, our seemingly non-stop dive adventure having finally come to an end. The sea is glassy-flat, as it has been for most every day of the cruise, the sky a deep blue, with just a few white clouds scattered here and there. I'm trying to choose those several 'best' dives about which to write (magazine space simply doesn't allow for 'all' or even 'most'), but I'm finding it slightly bewildering, there having been so many, one after another.

Our run had taken us on a circuitous route through the more than 1,500 islands of Raja Ampat ('the Four Kings' in the local Bahasa Indonesia language), Indonesia's most-acclaimed diving area. For all its prodigious reputation as being in the centre of biodiversity in the Coral Triangle and that the sheer numbers of species and concentrated numbers of fish and other marine creatures one encounters are simply astounding – I really wasn't prepared for what that actually meant, until having experienced it myself.

Our dives were of several general types. Some centred in and around channels, which bring in steady flows of nutrient, supporting massive stands of corals and gorgonian fans, huge schools of fish (the fusiliers of several species, covering large areas of the reef, were often too dense to see one's way through) and the predators that feed on them. Other sites were calm, island-side slopes, reef-flats and drop-offs, featuring prolific hard and soft corals, many fish species and lots of turtles, including unusual numbers of hawksbills. The final – really fun – category could best only be described as 'very unique and... unexpected'.

Because of different preferred styles of diving, the dive guides were very accommodating for us nine passengers, generally running three groups, especially on the high-current dives... one group that typically went deep and hooked on for longer periods when there was high current; one that preferred more gentle dives at more-moderate depths; and my preferred group, which liked heading to the deep point, then

“ Almost immediately we began seeing denizens – small, stumpy-spined cuttlefish, flatworms, a strange banded sole and then an unusual sight – a gigantic, 40cm-long giant balor shell crawling over the bottom, long proboscis extended ”



Turtle chilling on the reef



Schools of fish are common-place



The crystal-clear water is beyond tempting



Gorgonian seafan

moving about and hooking on at various times and places for brief moments when the current was really running (when making images it's tough just to wait and hope something will come along to get its picture taken!).

So... back to my dilemma of which of the nearly 30 dives and related adventures (the trip was more than dive-dive-dive) to single out... To pick one, I guess I have to start with Blue Magic in Damphier Strait, which we dived on the trip out (and happily) again on our return. It was perhaps the most-dramatic, high-current dive site, with a negative-drop to 30m to the flow-facing point of a large, oblong coral mound where huge schools of fish moved about among gorgonian fans and soft corals, especially chevron barracuda and big-eye trevally. Other schooling fish, especially mixed groups of snapper, ▶

“ We would hook on, wait a few moments until mantas made close passes, then release and drift to the next mound, and repeat ”



Snapping anemonefish hiding in their host



The reefs are a riot of colour



Curious sweetlips are not scared of divers

the bottom to near the surface, forming columns and pillars of bright colour, the fish closely packed together in sinuous displays, barely moving in the slight current, utterly accepting of divers being within touching distance.

Scattered among them were longfin and circular spadefish and solitary giant sweetlips, and in crevices in the riotous coral garden were tasseled wobbegong sharks surrounded by masses of tiny, glittering pearly cardinalfish; anemones with anemonefish; giant clams and hordes of other species. The final surprise was found nearby under the town's small, wooden pier, where large clumps of hard and soft corals hung down, sheltering many sweetlips, rabbitfish and snapper; and the glowing, blue, ambient light created remarkable photographic possibilities.

By that point in the trip the variety and breadth of the Raja Ampat experience was beginning to sink in, and our next special dive came soon after. In the Airberek Island area, in a wide, meandering swath of channels, kilometres from the islands to either side, we watched from the boat as the glassy surface gradually began to move and swirl, more and more as we progressed, until we were in a tidal river of currents. When we began seeing the dark tips of manta wings breaking the surface in all directions, we had reached

sweetlips, squirrelfish and spadefish, tended to gather toward the current, packed closely together, side-by-side, cheek to cheek, in large congregations, something like I have seen nowhere else. Drifting along toward shallower water to finish out our multi-level profiles, we found massive coral gardens thick with different reef tropicals and surprising numbers of big bumphead parrotfish and Napoleon wrasse.

A reef-slope dive early into our trip was also the first of the several 'unique and unexpected' dives we were to experience, off the Mansuar village of Sawandarek. For what was to come, it was a peaceful but rather innocuous place. Its story was wonderful, however; a village that had decided to stop fishing and harvesting on its just-off-the-beach reef, and instead to centre its economic activities around welcoming visiting

divers, plus creating a coral and giant clam nursery. While certainly something I wanted to experience and support, it wasn't the normal setting leading to super-high expectations for the diving and photography. As we slipped into the calm, shallow water over a beautiful coral slope that angled down from the shoreline - my max depth was about 15m - everything changed, and we found ourselves in the midst of huge schools of fish, by the thousands - ribbon, diagonal-banded and many-spotted sweetlips, blacktail snapper, wide-band fusiliers and more, in such congregations as I'd never seen before, anywhere. Their groupings extended up from



Majestic manta ray flies by

EMPEROR RAJA LAUT

At 31 metres long, with a 7.3 metre beam, the twin-masted schooner Emperor Raja Laut is built in classic, Indonesian style, and is modern, roomy and utterly comfortable for its (maximum) 12 passengers. With six cabins, all with private bathrooms, full interior AC, a large, shaded deck area and great fresh, European and Indonesian cuisine (which can accommodate vegetarian guests every meal), its cruises would be a joy even without the great diving. WI-FI is available, except in certain very remote areas.

The dive operation is top-flight, with French and local dive leaders, EANx, Scubapro rental equipment, very efficient gear-storage and donning areas, and two fast RIBs for reaching dive sites. For photographers there is an air-conditioned photo area with multiple charging stations. For information, check out: www.emperordivers.com



The coral pinnacles are smothered in growth



Wobbegong shark



Sweetlips under the jetty



Scorpionfish



Bumphead parrotfish over the reef

Manta Sandy, an extraordinary manta dive. Quickly dropping down to a rough, white sand and gravel channel bottom at 18m, we flew on the current. Within moments, a large manta came to us, just metres away, from behind us, then another soon after from the opposite direction. We then began reaching large, stony coral mounds scattered here and there along the shallower sides of the channel, each of which appeared to be a classic, manta cleaning station. We would hook on, wait a few moments until mantas made close passes, then release and drift to the next mound, and repeat. In our 60-minute dive, I was approached by, and made close, strobe-lit images of, at least eight large mantas and saw numbers more outside of good photographic range. It was very interesting that they weren't being cleaned, but simply seemed to be coming in for curious looks at us. Marvellous, marvellous.



Our first night dive was just off the Airborek Jetty. Expectations were high, because it is a place where the unusual, Raja epaulette ('walking') shark, found only in Raja Ampat, could sometimes be seen. We went in, onto a sand and rubble slope with scattered coral heads and sponges – classic, macro-night dive territory. Almost immediately we began seeing denizens – small, stumpy-spined cuttlefish, flatworms, and a strange banded sole. Moving toward the shallows near dive's end, we found a brilliant, red fire clam.

Soon, my guide began quickly swimming up into the shallows – like to 1m of depth – over a thick forest of antler coral, just off the beach. I followed, inching along to avoid touching anything, knowing he was looking for something; then, the 'wagging light' signal meaning a 'something' had been found. Edging in close, there was the most lovely and unusual small shark I have ever seen, walking on its pectoral fins across the bottom, in and out of the coral branches – a Raja epaulette. ▶



Picture-postcard perfect

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The reefs cover extensive distances

DIVERSE TRAVEL

Diverse Travel is a specialist dive tour operator that creates tailored itineraries for its clients, and is operated by a small team who are all keen, well-travelled divers who have actually sampled the multitude of resorts, boats and destinations they offer. Whatever you want to achieve on a trip, the Diverse team will work with you to craft the perfect holiday.

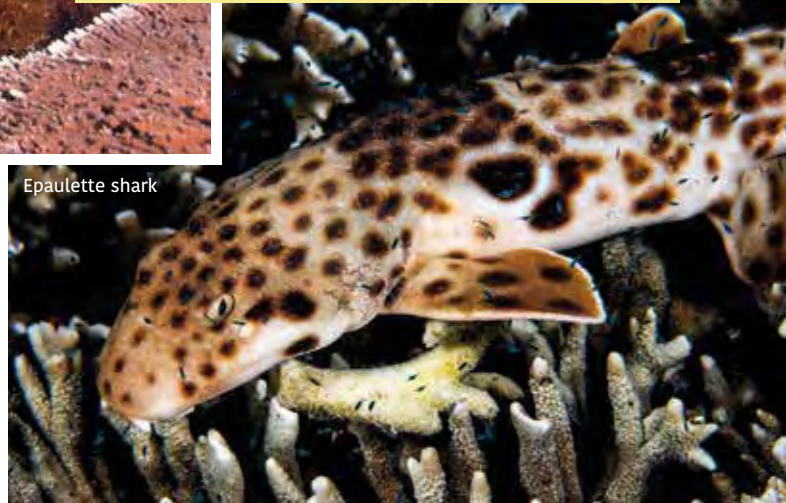
www.diversetravel.co.uk

The close-up images that resulted were utterly delightful.

Perhaps our most-unexpected dive of all occurred late in the trip, in an area called The Passage. Between a huge assemblage of large and small, jungled islands rimmed with mangrove forests was a kilometres-long series of twisting and turning, narrow 'rivers' and interconnected 'lakes'. When we looked down through the clear water, large coral heads sprouted out of the sand bottom, and colourful soft corals hung from the limestone walls of the channels – this wasn't an area of freshwater rivers and lakes, but instead was the ocean moving between a complex cluster of up-thrust islands.

After a thorough briefing for the rather complex dive, we entered a narrow channel where the current was fierce but manageable when we tucked in close to the channel wall. We pulled ourselves along the bottom against the flow, the light muted under the branches of the overhanging trees. Soft corals were everywhere, and schools of bumphead parrotfish meandered about, letting us in unusually close. Snapper, sweetlips and spadefish came in and out as we scabbled along. Then, a cavern's-mouth opened to our right side, and we left the current for its still water. Just inside, a big school of pickhandle barracuda rested, moving slowly apart to allow us through. We ascended to find an open-air grotto with a few openings to the jungle above, light beams streaming in.

Back out into the channel, we continued along, finding more caverns, the last one our dive's goal. At the back of the submerged chamber, a narrow, soft coral-festooned chimney



Epaulette shark

angled upwards, just large enough for one diver at a time to slither through, to surface inside another large grotto. A narrow crevice extending above and below the water-line opened to the Passage's channel and to the bright sunlight reflecting from the trees on the jungled hillside beyond.

I wish I had more space available; I'd also describe Melissa's Garden, one of the most-beautiful coral gardens I've ever seen... which also had blacktip sharks and schooling barracuda, in very close. And, I'd mention more topside adventures, like when we hiked up a high, island hillside in darkness to watch red birds of paradise in mating displays at dawn; or when we made our way to a peak at Pianemo, for the majestic, constantly-published Raja Ampat signature-view of green islands and turquoise waters; and...

Well, wish as I might, I guess I'm forced to save those and other Raja Ampat stories for yet another time. ■



Aerial view of Raja Ampat