

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Raja Ampat Islands, Indonesia

is this the world's best diving?

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Web site address:
<http://www.undercurrent.org>

Editorial Office:

Ben Davison
Publisher and Editor
125 East Sir Francis Drake Blvd.
No. 200
Larkspur, CA 94939
BenDavison@aol.com

Dear Fellow Diver:

The faint outline of the huge creature was unfamiliar, except for the blunt head. My first thought was pilot whale, but as it emerged from the blue I was watching an 8-foot dugong (Pacific manatee) lumbering along the reef. Sensing my presence, it disappeared with a few powerful flips, transforming itself into a rocketing torpedo. In the Raja Ampats (Four Sultans), even the safety stops served up great sightings like this dugong, or a lethal blue-ringed octopus and banded sea snakes.

This was my second trip to the Raja Ampats, where thriving reefs, rare macro life, a profusion of fish, and a setting untouched by time may well boast the world's finest coral reef biodiversity: 450 species of hard corals (half the world's total), 950 species of reef fish (almost twice the number in Paul Humann's Caribbean Reef Fish identification book), and a comparable array of invertebrates.

Situated off the coast of Papua (formerly known as Irian Jaya), which shares the island of New Guinea with Papua New Guinea, these are among the more remote islands in Indonesia (it takes two to three days to get there from the U.S.). With only 7,700 inhabitants sprinkled among hundreds of islands, spread over 23,630 square miles, there's little to do except soak up the jaw-dropping beauty of the reefs and islands. Best of all, the price is not prohibitive. With today's low airfares to Asia, you can get there from Los Angeles, sleep, eat, and dive for a week for less than \$3,000.

The only land-based diving is Irian Diving's Kri Island Camp, operated by owner Max Ammer. Garrulous, with a youthful smile, Max entertains guests with his own adventure stories. He arrived from Holland 12 years ago, became

enamored with the undersea beauty, and built a low-impact dive operation. Many of the 20+ dive sites (more are being discovered) are minutes from the pier.

At a site called Sardine, a backward roll from one of the two handmade fiberglass dive boats dropped me up-current of the reef corner, but the 2-knot current pushed me past it. Finning furiously and using the lee bommies as rest stops, I fought back to the corner to grab a piece of dead coral at 50 feet and feasted my eyes on schools of tail-fin batfish, bigeye trevally, oriental sweetlips, and yellow stripe barracuda so dense I could barely see other divers just feet away. A 4-foot Napoleon wrasse sauntered by, while dog-tooth tuna and mackerel made repeated passes. It was the most fish I'd ever seen in one place, including Palau's Blue Corner. After 15 minutes, the current dropped, and I glided along a slope overflowing with hard and soft corals. They flashed neon reds, oranges, greens, and blues, almost overwhelming the colorful reef fish.

When I returned at night during slack tide, macro life thrived. Otto, the guide, spotted three fingernail-sized pygmy seahorses clinging to a pink sea fan, and he found a 2-inch pygmy cuttlefish, its translucent body pulsing color changes. Everywhere I probed, a different nudibranch appeared, including varieties that didn't show up in my fish books.

In the morning, after fruit and oatmeal or crepes (eggs upon request), I would grab my gear and jump into a dive boat. They're fast, Spartan, yet functional. There's a small enclosed area for rough seas and rain, but when the boat is full with six to eight divers, there isn't enough room for everybody inside, so rain gear comes in handy (bring your own). Three dives a day was the norm, with night dives on request.

Should Female Divers Beware?

A female diver who made a single booking on the Peter Hughes *Wind Dancer* last year, when it was still operating out of the Turks and Caicos, found herself assigned a male cabin mate, much to her displeasure. Although contrary to the long-standing Hughes policy of always booking single passengers with another of the same gender, it was an error. We later learned that the Hughes folks did a responsible job rectifying it.

Like the Hughes fleet, most live-aboard companies recognize the need for same-gender roommates. A spokesperson for the *Undersea Hunter* and the *Undersea Explorer* told *Undercurrent*: "As long as there is space in the trip that you request, we will take your booking and only book another female passenger with you. If no other female passenger books in the same trip as you, you will have the cabin for yourself." That policy was echoed by the Explorer fleet serving the Caribbean and Australia.

Wayne Hasson, who runs the Aggressor fleet, says that if a single female passenger can't be provided with a female roommate on an Aggressor boat, she will be given a state-room to herself, without being charged a single supplement. "It costs us money," Hasson says, "but with more women traveling now, it's rarely a problem."

However, on Mike Ball's fleet, there are no guarantees. Laura Waters of their North American reservations office stated, "We do aim to match up single people with same sex roommates where possible; however, unfortunately we are unable to guarantee this. If you wish to guarantee a cabin to yourself you can do this with a 70 percent surcharge on top of the basic berth cost."

So, if you're a single diver and want a guarantee that you'll end up with a same-sex roommate, be careful to clarify the policy up front and in writing.

P.S.: Next year the Aggressor fleet will be conducting single diver charters in Belize (April 17 to April 24) and Cayman (June 26 to July 3). They say that "this is not the 'Dating Game' or a wacky reality television program. It is just a laid back dive vacation for single men and women."

Following a low-key checkout dive with Max, I was free to dive my own profile without restriction on decompression dives, even though the chamber in Mandano requires an airlift from Sorong with a connection in Ujung Pandang. They asked us to stick to pre-stated bottom times due to the strong tide-dependent currents (we experienced downward currents twice). Slower-paced dives were possible at slack tide or in protected lagoons.

Max's briefings were detailed and accurate. The topography generally consisted of sloping reefs that leveled at 80 to 110 feet, or mini-walls that descended from rock outcroppings. Water temps ranged from the high 70s to the low 80s, with cooler upwellings; visibility was 60 to 80 feet. The weather was hot and humid, but there was usually a nice trade wind. We spent surface intervals at camp for nearby dives, and for day excursions (Kabui Bay, Fam Island, Bantanta Island) a picnic lunch was packed, and we explored the white-sand beaches, where I found Nautilus and other rare shells.



Hardly a luxury resort (\$145 to \$165 per day, depending on length of stay, with food and diving), the camp is full of character and served by a friendly Papuan staff. Otto is a real jokester, and the camp matron, Yolanda, assures that everything runs smoothly. The rest of the staff don't speak English, and, though shy, they were helpful and sang as they went about their day.

The camp (capacity is 20 people) straddles a sugary white-sand beach lined with coconut palms and backed by a steep jungle. Parrots, hornbills, and a cassowary (now departed) who loved jumping for bananas, came and went. The rooms and dining area are over the water, so trade winds ease the heat and keep the few bugs at bay. Privacy (sound) is compromised due to the airy design. Rooms are simply furnished with a floor mattress on a woven mat, covered with mosquito netting, plus a table and chairs constructed of local materials like bamboo and palm thatch; cushions on the chairs and recliners would make them more comfortable. Linens were changed every day. Each room has electrical lighting and outlets (220v European) that run off an unobtrusive generator. As for showers, the barrel of sun-warmed water with a scoop was hard to get used to after getting chilled at sea.



They serve dinner and lunch family-style -- fish (sometimes chicken and beef), in Indonesian sauces (some spicy), with rice or yams. Vegetables ranged from a spinach-like fern that grows in the nearby jungle to eggplant and cabbage. Fruits included mango, bananas, papaya, and watermelon. Yolanda and her kitchen crew prepared meals and pre-dinner snacks (request the banana fritters!) in a kerosene wok in the open-air dining area, which made for a good cooking show. Dinners were tasty, hearty, and nutritious, though I craved good old American cooking by the end of my stay. Beverages included different syrups for flavoring the warm

water. Slightly cool beer was kept in a cooler with the perishables. Bring your own booze and extra beer if you want more than a couple a day.

Usually, after dinner, people retired to quarters for reading, stargazing, and quiet conversation. The seven guests included Germans, young Brits on an extended Indonesian trip, and a family from Maryland. Sometimes the staff entertained us with homemade instruments and Papuan songs.

A day excursion to Kabui Bay offers one of the more unusual dives anywhere. At first it appeared to be a swift river winding through the overhanging jungle, but it was a 60-foot-wide channel connecting the bay to the Halmahera Sea. The flow was the incoming tide. We motored upstream, where I dropped in and was swept into the turbulence, feeling like an underwater kayaker. There were many bends in the channel, so as I eased into the first eddy, I was surprised to see bright-maroon dendronephthya soft coral growing up to the surface. A dazzling assemblage of invertebrates flourished at snorkeling depths, with delicately sculpted transparent tunicates, vibrant encrusting sponges, and spidery crinoids displaying a rainbow of colors in water no deeper than 25 feet.

As I eddy-hopped downstream, each bend became a new dive site. Regal lionfish peeked out from coral fortresses, and the day-glo pink and lime-green colors of neon sea slugs were straight from a 1960s black-light poster. Angelfish, clown triggers, and ornate butterflyfish glided in and out of the hard corals, and a school of Moorish idols zigzagged in the current. Otto told me to search for archerfish, which position themselves under jungle branches, ready to gun down unsuspecting insects with their well-aimed stream of spit.

Sharks and Napoleon wrasse use the passage as a quick entry and exit into Kabui Bay, and I spotted a 6-foot whitetip heading upcurrent, as well as a herd of 12 humphead parrotfish searching for their next coral-grazing feast. Further downstream, I came upon a 7-foot wobbegone shark under a coral ledge, reminding me of an overfed toadfish. The dive ended with several narrow entrances to caverns that penetrated the rocky shoreline.

During our surface interval we meandered through the upper reaches of Kabui Bay, negotiating narrow waterways between strangely shaped limestone for-

Whale Rider

When the mayday call came about a stricken humpback whale caught in lines off New Zealand's Kaikoura coast in mid-June, Tom Smith strapped on his tank and raced into action. On two earlier occasions, the 38-year-old fisherman had responded to a roped whale, and both times he had managed to free them.

He said that saving a humpback whale was "a real once-in-a-lifetime encounter" after he freed one from craypot lines in Kaikoura in June 2001. He said he donned scuba gear and made eye contact to let the whale know he was there. "As I swam up I could see it drop its head and thought it was going to dive, but what it did was to lift its tail and lay dead still while I cut off the float and the last of the rope." After the whale was freed, it came up right beside the boat, where it stayed for a few moments, before lifting its tail and slowly swimming away.

This time, 30 tourists on a whale watching adventure watched a tragedy unfold.

Smith was on board his vessel, *The Bounty*, with his wife, father-in-law, and a friend when fishermen alerted him to the trapped whale, about 30 feet long. The tourists were watching the whale when Smith arrived and leaped into the water. He was trying to cut the line attached to a crayfish pot when the whale lifted its tail, smashing it down on its rescuer underneath. Smith and the bubbles from his tank disappeared.

The *New Zealand Herald* reported that the Coast Guard and locals searched the area, giving up after four hours when they knew there was no hope of finding him alive. The whale apparently broke free of the nylon rope and survived.

mations that rivaled the Rock Islands of Palau. In a large amphitheater of jungle-draped cliffs, a pod of six dolphins silently plied the waters for fish. Further along, Otto pointed to a tiny ledge 10 feet above the water line. There sat four human skulls, peering across the water. Nearby, we saw a cave where several bed frames held a collection of human skulls and bones, a ransacked Papuan burial site from the early 1900s. We visited a larger cave where thousands of bats roosted.

I saw Tridacna clams the size of a small bathtub near Wai Island and monster Queensland groupers and leaf scorpionfish on Cape Kri. Large mature hawksbill and green turtles were everywhere. The bright-green table corals of Fam Island were big enough to seat a family of 10 for dinner. Throw in a collection of World War II airplane wrecks, and I never had a mediocre dive on any of the standard dive sites. After diving Wakatobi, a good portion of Sulawesi, Bali, and Alor, this is surely some of Indonesia's finest diving.

So what's the downside? Pelagics and large fish (sharks, tuna, Napoleons) have taken a significant hit, though when the current was right, individuals and small schools still made an appearance at some locations. The underwater topography on the standard sites, with some exceptions (e.g., The Passage), was not particularly unique nor dramatic. Illegal fishing is slowly on the rise and will continue to threaten the Raja Ampats until locals are given adequate incentives to protect their reefs. And there is no diving on Saturday, the Sabbath: Max and many staff are Seventh-Day Adventists.

Irian Diving offers multi-day exploratory trips to the Wayag group, limestone islands fronted by 100-meter cliffs that plunge directly into the sea. The tranquil inner lagoon holds hidden passages and secret inlets, some leading to sea caves, spectacular rock arches, and secluded turtle-nesting beaches. For sheer beauty, Wayag is the gem of the Raja Ampats. We did five days of diving in the area and found everything from five-star reefs, teeming with fish and invertebrate life, to a few mediocre sites that wouldn't warrant repeats (that's what you get when you explore). Max brings a cook, boat crew, and compressor. There are no accommodations, but we camped in the most dramatic and serene tropical setting imaginable.

Ammer's Going Upscale: Just as we were ready to go to print, we e-mailed Ammer to see if there had been changes since our incognito reviewer visited. Ammer said that he sold Irian Diving to Papua Diving, a four-person Dutch Company that includes Ammer. The existing resort will get two new boats and will add unlimited fresh water, toilets, and showers. Out of sight of the eco resort, they are constructing a small upscale resort, which will have nine bungalows with bathrooms and air conditioning. He says they will have three boats for six divers each, a large photographers' facility, a restaurant with menu choices and view over the lagoon, telephone and Internet facilities, and a research center. They hope to be able to handle six guests in the new quarters as early as January.

Irian Diving

Diving for Experienced	★★★★★
Diving for Beginners	Don't go
Snorkling (off-camp)	★★★
Accommodations	★★★
Food	★★★
Health of Reef	★★★★★
Fish Life	★★★★★
Macro Life	★★★★+
Value	★★★★★

★ = poor

★★★★★ = excellent

Worldwide Scale

-- M.O.

* * * * *

Indonesian live-aboards travel to the Raja Ampats from September through February. One of our Undercurrent correspondents on his way to Camp Kri got sidelined during the camp's brief closure, but Ammer substituted a trip on the locally based live-aboard, Shakti. Here is his report:

The Shakti is a 33-meter, twin-masted motor sailer capable of cruising 12.5 knots. She is an Indonesian-built "pinisi," a local design with generations of history. With three triple cabins, one double, and two singles, the Shakti can hold 13 guests. The "triples" are a bit of a stretch, so she more comfortably accommodates 10. The single cabins are on the main deck and are reached through the dining room.

The four larger cabins are below decks, with a spacious area dubbed "the lounge," with padded benches and a TV, which was used primarily as a work space for photographers. The dining room served as the lounge. All cabins are air conditioned but do not have individual controls. Mine had an A/C problem, rendering it unbearably hot and stuffy. I usually slept on the cushions in the lounge or sundeck when rain wasn't threatening. Air ranged from the 90s during the day to the mid to high 70s at night.

Because there are no en suite bathrooms, I had to climb up from below decks to a bathroom on either the port or starboard side. Only one has a fresh water shower. The second is used primarily by the crew. Guests shared a single bathroom. The shower had warm water only when the boat was underway and the generators had been running.

When I arrived in Sorong, the two Shakti dive boats, an inflatable and a 13-foot fiberglass skiff, ferried us from the airport dock to where the Shakti was moored, a five-minute trip. The boat isn't up to luxury live-aboard standards, but it served just fine, thanks to the two English divemasters, Andrew and Cherry, who were affable hosts and knocked themselves out to give us good diving. Both skiff operators took great care in handling the cameras, and the crew did their respective jobs well and with good humor. The aluminum 80 tanks were consistently filled to 3,000 psi.

I dived from either of the two small boats, which was something of a challenge since they had no ladders and I had to pull myself in over the side. I set up my tank before each dive, and the crew stored it behind the bench seats of the dive boats and toted it back to the Shakti after each dive. Although buddy diving wasn't enforced, we stayed mostly together. No time or depth limits were imposed;

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This year's Chapbook will be better than ever. It will be mailed during the first two weeks of December to all subscribers of record. So send your report today!

— Ben Davison

P.S.: We print 15,000 copies of the Chapbook, so more people read your report than will read your first novel. So respond today.

Other Liveboards

Besides the *Shakti*, you have a choice of more upscale Bali-based live-aboards that serve the area in the fall or winter, such as the *Kararu* (www.kararu.com), *Dive Komodo* (www.divekomodo.com), *Adventure Komodo* (www.adventureh2o.com), as well as the *Pindito* and the *Pelagian*. You can get more information about Irian Diving or these boats, and make reservations, through a few U.S. travel specialists including:

Dive Discovery
San Rafael, CA
800-886-7321
www.divediscovery.com

Island Dreams
Houston, TX
800-346-6116
www.islandream.com

Reef & Rainforest
Sausalito, CA
800-794-9767
www.reefrainforest.com

however, I never had a reason to dive below 130 feet. Dives ended when divers got low enough on air to have to surface. Most of my dives ran 60 to 75 minutes. The choice of sites, the drop-in points, the time of the day dives, the visibility, and indeed the entire itinerary was dictated by the tides and currents. Andrew and

Cherry scheduled the dives around slack tide, but that was not always feasible.

Our first dive was a leisurely drift along Fam Wall, encrusted with soft corals, abundant nudibranchs, and gorgonians with pigmy seahorses -- a dream dive for macro photographers. Our second dive was one of those hang-on-to-your-hat-and-watch-the-blur-of-the-wall-as-it-whizzes-by dives. Upon entry, instructions like "keep the wall on the right" often changed to "wall on the left." While a few dives were suitable for only very experienced divers, the unpredictability made the dives more exciting, and the currents certainly produced more fish action.

During the 10-day March cruise, we dived 16 very different dive sites, most "world class." The undisputed favorite was Melissa's Garden, discovered by Max and named after his daughter. The maximum depth was 60 feet, but I went no deeper than 30 feet. The site explodes with color from the profusion of soft corals, anemones, tunicates, hydroids, etc. We seven well-traveled divers agreed we had never seen hard corals anywhere in the world like those at Melissa's Garden. There were vast fields of elkhorn, staghorn, finger, boulder star, great star, and lettuce coral. Brain coral was monstrous. What looked like large bommies at a distance would turn out to be mammoth sponges. The site teemed with reef fish, eels, giant clams, and nudibranchs. And it served up less common surprises such as large banded sea kraits, some hitting the 6-foot mark.

The *Shakti* does not offer Nitrox and has no rental gear, although the crew did lend a mask when one diver's broke. They also performed minor repairs, but bring a good save-a-dive kit. I averaged three dives per day. Night dives were available most nights, conditions permitting.

Meals were tasty, wholesome, varied, and plentiful. There was always fresh fish caught by the crew, Indonesian dishes, and a nice mix of Western food, pasta dishes, and plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables. We even had a couple of surprises like fresh, made-from-scratch flour tortillas and delicious breadfruit chips. The two cooks, Octofina and Henny, are workhorses who never stopped. All beverages were an extra charge on the honor system. The beer supply dried up late in the trip; there was no wine or hard liquor.

My fellow passengers and I spent our evenings watching videos from this trip and past trips, filling in dive logs, perusing fish ID books, listening to the crew sing, stargazing, working on cameras, listening to newscasts on the short wave radio, and getting to know each other.

Though providing superb service, Andrew and Cherry asked us not to tip them. They considered themselves well compensated. Instead they suggested that all tips should go to the local crew as a whole, the less visible members of the crew who were equally responsible for providing good service and a good trip. We all agreed to put \$100 each, generous by local standards, into the common tip pot.

In hindsight, being switched to the Shakti was quite fortunate. I experienced the better sites dived by Irian Divers, as well as some sites seen by precious few divers, which lent a sense of adventure and exploration to the trip. And the diving was, in a word, remarkable.

-- I.I.



Diver's Compass: A one-week package at Camp Kri (three daily dives, meals, accommodations, boat transfer from airport near Sorong) runs \$1,055. ... With longer stays, and for repeat guests, the price comes down. ... You can enter Indonesia via Jakarta, through Ujung Pandang (Makassar), Bali, or Manado (northern Sulawesi). ... These islands are far removed from the scattered radical Islamic activity in Indonesia. ... I flew to Jakarta (\$800 to \$1,000 from Denver on Singapore Air), overnights at the Quality Motel (\$75), which is conveniently in the terminal just outside customs, then flew to Sorong on the 5 a.m. Pelita Air flight (\$500). ... I arrived in Sorong at 1 p.m. to catch a prearranged two-hour transport to Camp Kri in one of Max's boats -- great views of surrounding mountainous islands, but can be bone-jarring in rough conditions. ... Watch the weight limit on Pelita (20 kg, \$3 per extra kg); pack heavy items in your carry-on. ... Irian Diving (www.iriandiving.com) can help with your hotel, air, and transfers. ... Transfers from Sorong run \$150 if you want to travel on a day other than Sunday. ... If you want Indonesian rupiah, change your currency before you get to Sorong (Irian Diving accepts U.S. dollars). ... The rainy season generally occurs between April and September, and the calmest months are reportedly November and April. ... Malaria is endemic to the area. ... The camp's aluminum 80s were filled to 3,000 to 3,200 psi. ... Nitrox was unavailable, and there was a limited selection of basic, well-worn rental gear. ... Repair facilities were limited, but Max and Otto are resourceful and mechanically adept. ... They stock basic replacement items such as O-rings and hoses. ... Tipping is optional; gifts (T-shirts, fishing lures, or hotel toiletries like shampoos, soaps, and creams for the women) were appreciated. ... The Shakti offers 12-day, 11-night Raja Ampat cruises for \$2,145 (diveliveaboard.info/schedules.htm).

Two Live-Aboard Fatalities Raise Question

were safety procedures sufficient?

Live-aboard dive boats are not search and rescue vessels. They're not floating hospitals. But how much responsibility do they have for dealing with emergencies? Two recent reports suggest that some live-aboards may be unprepared to handle life-and-death situations.

A passenger on the Peter Hughes *Star Dancer* was diving the

point at Peleliu Cut in Palau last March when a diver was brought up unconscious and not breathing. Our correspondent, who wishes to remain anonymous, saw that passengers were administering CPR and oxygen to the stricken diver; evidently spelling crew members who had begun the procedure several minutes earlier. An R.N. aboard took charge and

began administering emergency first aid. The nearby *Palau Aggressor* provided a defibrillator. (Hughes fleet captain Allen Cull told *Undercurrent* that while Hughes boats don't currently carry defibrillators, they soon will.)

The 45-year-old victim, Elisa Tricco, regained a heartbeat after an hour of CPR and began breath-