



DIVING WITH THE WOW FACTOR: THE RAJA AMPAT ISLANDS



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VIEW COMMENTS ▾

During ten days living on a boat, drifting around the Raja Ampat islands, Andy Turner finds more than just a diver's playground in Indonesian West Papua.

"Ladies and gentlemen we have begun our descent to Sorong". Flicking up the airline window blind I'm greeted with an almost comical vision of paradise. Pink candyfloss clouds part to reveal tropical islands straight out of *King Kong*, each crowned with a mohican of swaying palms and fringed with bleached white sand. To the east sunlight breaks over the mountains of Papua New Guinea, to the west stretch the fabled spice islands of the Moluccas while below me lies my destination, the reefs of Raja Ampat.

Translating as "the Four Kings", this quartet of craggy limestone lumps sprinkled off [Indonesian](#) West Papua form a kind of marine [Galapagos](#). Packed with unique creatures – among them walking sharks and pygmy seahorses – it's the most diverse underwater ecosystem on the planet, with over 1700 species of fish (compared with just 300 in UK waters) and 600 types of coral. Unsurprisingly it's on every diver's bucket list and I'm giddy with excitement to be arriving here in early January.



Raja Ampat has some of the world's healthiest reefs. Photo: Jay Monney

Home for the next ten days is a luxury liveaboard confidently named the *WAOW*, an acronym for "Water Adventure Ocean Wide" – though they should have just gone for "OMG!". Anchored off Sorong, she resembles the love child of the *Black Pearl* and an oligarch's mega-yacht: 190ft of stunning Borneo ironwood and canvas sails pimped up with five-star comfort and state of the art scuba kit. Mooring alongside I can feel the hairs on the back of my neck prickling.



The three-masted WAOW sets sail from Sarong. Photo: Jay Monney

A nut-brown, tattooed figure grabs me by the elbow and pulls me on deck. "Bienvenue!" he says, welcoming the other guests, all of whom happen to be Swiss or French. I start to worry my schoolboy Francais won't survive the trip but fortunately Jay and wife Kay, our cruise directors, are fluent in seven languages from English to Thai. We meet the crew and our dive guide, Hawe – 5ft nothing of bouffant hair and giggling enthusiasm – and have the three essentials pointed out: there'll be 3-4 dives per day, free wine with dinner and "please don't fall overboard".

After a morning watching dolphins dancing in our wake we reach Blue Magic, our first dive site. Splashing in off the side I'm reminded of why I learnt to dive in the first place. The reefs here simply look like reefs should look – pulsing with fish and iridescent with colour. Having blown gigabytes of camera memory within a couple of days, I'm soon searching for a Safari style "Big Five": giant mantas, grey reef sharks, the not-so-big pygmy seahorses, schools of barracuda and the "walking" epaulette shark which drags itself across the ocean floor on its fins. Amazingly, these are ticked off by day five, a testament to Hawe's eagle eyes and Raja's sheer vitality.



Schooling barracuda. Photo: Jay Monney

Back on board, time passes in a lazy sequence of mealtime bells, dive briefings and hammock snoozing. Exploring the ship's library I find Alfred Russell Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago* which describes the very same "jutting limestone pinnacles and azure depths" that drift by outside. I realise that little has changed here since the 1850s. Thanks to its remote location there are barely half a dozen small scale dive resorts, with most visitors cruising through on a liveaboard like ours. Eventually the Francophone atmosphere begins to rub off and I'm soon saying "plongeur" rather than "dive" and have adopted "requin!" for "shark!". Somehow the language of Monsieur Cousteau seems appropriate.

On day six I wake up with a head clogged with cold. Having swallowed enough Sudafed to knock out a whale shark, I decide it's best to stay above water for a while and commandeer the ship's kayak. Annoyed to be missing the day's diving, my mood quickly improves when I find half a dozen baby reef sharks darting beneath me in a lagoon. Dragging the craft onto a beach, I narrowly avoid crunching several hermit crabs wrestling in the sand. Above me neon-green honeyeaters flit in and out of the razor-sharp karst cliffs.

It turns out travelling by kayak makes you something of a curiosity, and I'm soon chatting to a pair of fishermen who paddle past in a canoe weighed down with Spanish mackerel. They invite me to a game of volleyball and a drink on nearby Arborek Island. Despite my notebook overflowing with underwater superlatives it's this encounter that sticks longest in the memory – laughing curly-haired kids posing for photos and the taste of fresh coconut juice, cut from the nearest palm tree.



Children on Arborek Island (and beach image above). Photos: Steve Woods

Thanks to a combination of traditional know-how and some help from [NGOs like Sea Sanctuaries](#) the people of Arborek and Raja's other islands have made sure they can pass on a stunning natural inheritance to the next generation. Turning back toward Sorong and my flight home I can't help echoing Alfred Russell Wallace: while the WAOW, like Wallace's Victorian steamer is "one of the highest results of our civilization", like him, I'm inclined to rate the simple luxuries of a kayak almost as highly.

[Original Diving](#) offer trips to Raja Ampat year round and aboard the WAOW from October to April. From autumn 2014 flights are available from London Gatwick via Amsterdam to Jakarta with [Garuda Indonesia](#). From Jakarta flights connect to Sorong, departure point for dive cruises, via Makassar on Sulawesi.

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