

Into the Blue Beyond

# A JOURNEY FIT FOR A KING

It's a helluva trek to get out there, but if you make the journey out to Indonesia's Raja Ampat, you certainly won't be disappointed!

By **Wayne Brown**, courtesy of Aggressor Fleet

**RAJA AMPAT**, or the "Four Kings", is an archipelago of over 1,500 small islands, cays, and shoals surrounding the four main islands that give the area its name – Misool, Salawati, Batanta, and Waigeo. This is the part of the Coral Triangle which contains some of the richest marine biodiversity on earth. Our home for the ten-day journey around this famous destination is the *Raja Ampat Aggressor*.

The diving is as diverse as advertised, with sites ranging from fully submerged sea mounts to small islands that spread out below the surface like giant icebergs, to piers and bays. We are told that we will see the cutest pygmy seahorses on most sites, plenty of colourful nudibranchs and, moving up the size scale, multiple species of anemonefish, cuttlefish and stonefish to mobula rays, sharks and mantas. And yes, we saw everything on everyone's Raja Ampat bucket list and then some! Each dive offered a unique experience and opportunities to find specific fish and critters, like the walking shark, the blue-ringed octopus or graceful mantas.

Our dives started out in the central Raja Ampat area in the Dampier Strait at sites like Friwinbonda and Blue Magic. We spent four days here visiting more dive sites off the islands of Kri, Mansour and Arborek. At dive site Cape Kri, we entered in the morning on a rising tide with a little current (which is always necessary for good action!). Not only did we have large schools of chevron barracuda, surgeonfish and oriental sweetlips but also the largest school of huge bumphead parrotfish I have ever encountered.

We then made the 14-hour, overnight crossing to the southern Raja Ampat area, diving the islands of Balbullo, Wayil Batan and Misool. This area is known for its amazing colourful soft corals adding to the prolific underwater life. Nudi Rock is one of the most famous dive sites in Misool with beautiful coral reefs and hundreds of different corals. We spotted a walking shark as well as the Denise and bargibanti pygmy seahorses. We were constantly amazed at the number of different coral formation and their bright, incredible colours.



Images © Wayne Brown



We finished off at Boo island. Gus Ridge, a deep narrow ridge with beautiful coral reef on top was a great way to start out our day. At the very beginning of the dive we found a very big marble ray lying on the bottom that was not intimidated by the divers and let us all get a photo as we passed by. Two large mantas swam along the wall getting everyone's attention.

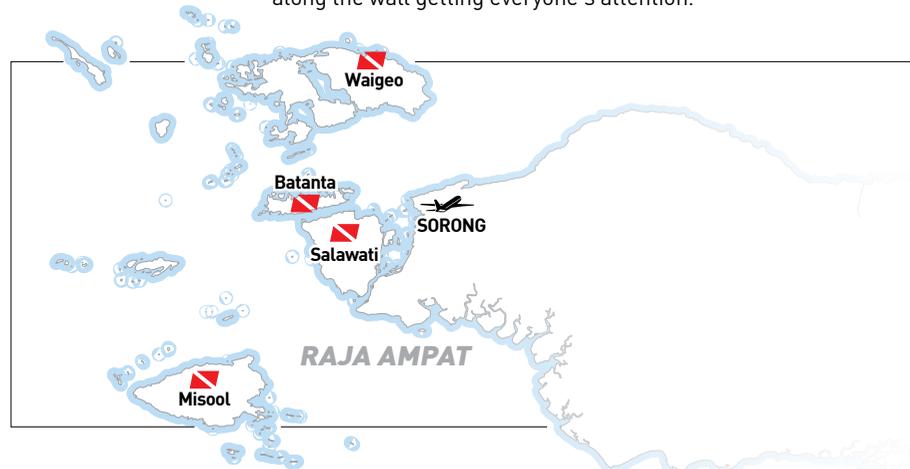
We also encountered a school of tuna, giant trevallies and napoleon wrasse. At the end of the dive, a guest even spotted big marlin moving fast near the surface.

By the end of the charter, I had photographed the elusive blue ringed octopus, the incredibly shy marble shrimp, a sea fan covered in the extremely tiny

skeleton shrimp and the small, colourful bob-tailed squid – all on my shot list for this charter.

As we made the 15-hour trip back to Sorong, everyone was immersed in deciding which pictures were their favourites and which dives sites they wanted to remember for their next visit... **SDAA**

Reefs in Raja Ampat are alive with colourful corals, home to a dizzying array of fish species, and are visited by majestic pelagics



**Getting there:**

Options for getting to the *Raja Ampat Aggressor* include: Fly to Jakarta then connect with Garuda Airlines via Makassar or Lion/Wing Air to Sorong; Fly to Bali Ngurah Rai International Airport (DPS) in Denpasar Indonesia with (an overnight stay may be required) then fly to Sorong (SOQ) Dominique Edward Osok Airport in West Papua; Fly to Singapore then Manado to Sorong or Singapore then Makassar to Sorong.



**Equipment and training:**

The diving is relatively easy with good visibility, but more experience and an Advanced Open Water certification will allow you to enjoy the experience to the full. Good buoyancy skills will also mean that your dives don't have a negative impact on the area's pristine reefs. Raja is also remote, so safe diving practices are even more important.



**Best time to dive:**

Diving is good in Raja Ampat all year round. Rainy season is from May to September which can affect visibility. October to May conditions are considered to be the best.