

THE LIVE ABOARD ISSUE

# SCUBA

D I V I N G

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF PADI CLUB



## A WORLD AWAITS

FIND YOUR NEXT  
ADVENTURE AT SEA



14 SCUBALAB RECS  
FOR TRAVEL GEAR





# THE ROYAL TREATMENT

Cruising the land of  
“Four Kings” in luxury on  
a Raja Ampat liveaboard

**BY TERRY WARD**



A school of reef bannerfish swarms a reef at a dive site in Raja Ampat, Indonesia.



I could barely make out Seth, my new dive buddy, through the fishiest ocean I'd seen in over half a lifetime of trips to some of the world's most coveted destinations.

It was my first time in Raja Ampat, in Indonesia's West Papua province, and we were only on our second dive. Yet it felt like every coral-covered place I'd been lucky enough to see before had been merely an appetizer compared to this overwhelming feast of marine life playing out before us.

We'd motored through the night from Sorong to eastern Misool in the utmost luxury aboard the world's largest wooden sailing yacht, *Lamima*, a 214-foot custom-built phinisi that can accommodate up to 14 ridiculously pampered guests on a private charter through Raja's storied waters (as well as other life-list

Indonesian dive destinations, such as Komodo and the Spice Islands).

All around us in Balbulol Lagoon, karst islands draped in jungle and shaped like thin tombstones stretched skyward; frigate birds careened by on thermals. Underwater, the beauty was even more bewildering—a riot of biodiversity I'd only hoped to one day witness.

During the briefing, our dive guide and cruise director, Ali, mentioned the site we'd be diving was known for two fish-frenzied pinnacles that might be hard to tear ourselves away from, so we'd need to keep an eye on our air.

Perhaps I should have anticipated the superlative experience diving No Contest based on the site's name, but once beneath the surface I felt myself get goosebumps despite the warm tropical water.

It was as if some unseen hand had whisked the water we were finning through into a tornado

of tropical and pelagic fish. They streamed in from every direction—above, below and all around—in huge flowing schools that ricocheted over the reef and boomed in and out of the blue.

Clouds of anthias and chromis levitated in jeweled hues from the coral, rising and falling to feed in the currents washing over the ridge. I gave up trying to tally all the species once I'd clocked red-tooth triggerfish, bannerfish, Moorish idols, blue and yellow fusiliers, pouty-mouthed sweetlips, yellow-lined and bluestripe snapper among scores of other species I couldn't begin to name.

I caught Seth's attention through the colorful chaos with an unofficial new dive signal for "mind blown"—pantomiming an explosion with both hands on the top of my head, like an emoji. Even if I'd been able to use words, they might have escaped me.

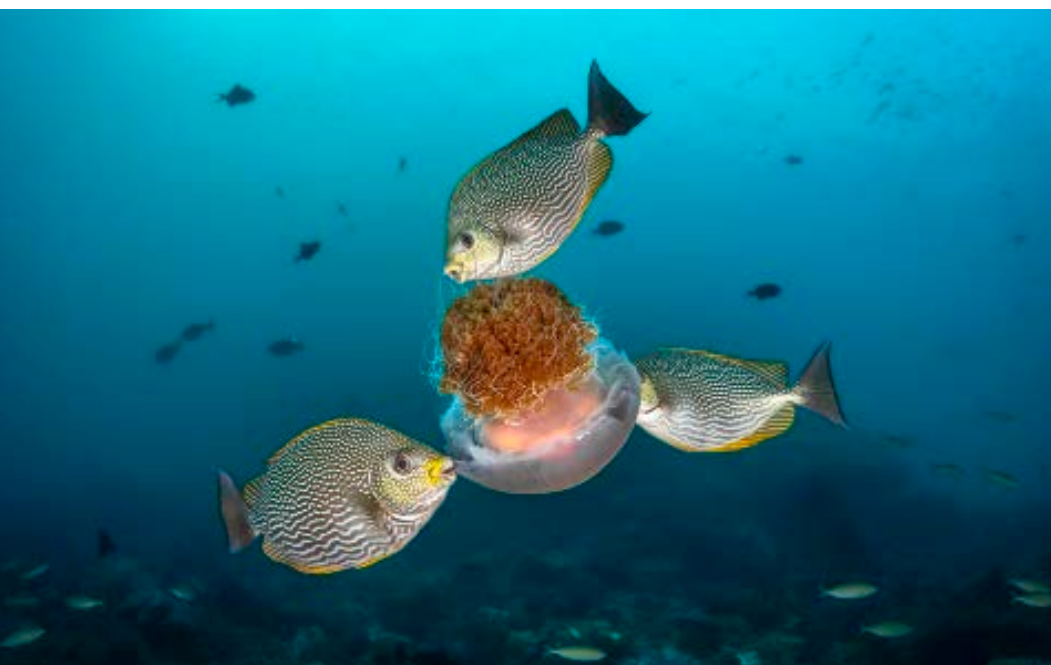
#### DIVE BUDDY SERENDIPITY

How Seth—an Indonesian from Java who now lives in North Carolina—and I came to be dive buddies is a story anyone who loves travel serendipity can appreciate.

The only time we'd met before reconnecting on *Lamima* had been back in 2012 in Bali, when a mutual friend introduced us at a busy bar in Seminyak.

We spent hours talking about all the places we still dreamed of diving and exploring in the archipelago, and Raja Ampat was on the list. And while we never again crossed paths in person after that evening, we later connected on Instagram and would occasionally share content of the things we both missed from Indonesia—mostly food- and diving-related.

A trio of streaked spinefoot feeds on a jellyfish. Opposite, clockwise from top: The 214-foot wooden phinisi *Lamima*; a vibrant reef typical of Raja Ampat; a wobbling shark lies on the coral.





## NEED TO KNOW

### When to Go

You can dive Raja Ampat year-round, but most liveaboards in the region, including *Lamima*, operate seasonally. *Lamima* is based in Sorong for liveboard trips in Raja Ampat from November to May. October to April is considered peak dry season in Raja Ampat, bringing the best visibility and calmest seas.

### Conditions

Water temperatures in Raja Ampat stay fairly consistent year-round, averaging between 82 and 86 degrees Fahrenheit. A skin suit or 3 mm wetsuit will suffice, with some divers opting for a shorty or just a rash guard and bathing suit. Dry season visibility averages from 65 to more than 100 feet, while May to September's rainy season usually sees viz dip to between 50 and 80 feet.

### Topside Fun

If you can dream it up in Raja Ampat, you can do it on board *Lamima*, from sunrise hikes and scouting for rare birds of paradise on Batanta Island to kayaking through caves near Misool or being led by hand by school kids around villages that may only see a few boats in an entire year.

### Certifications/ Requirements

Completion of the PADI Enriched Air Diver course is necessary to take advantage of the nitrox included on *Lamima*. PADI Open Water Diver courses are also available on board.



*Suddenly, as if an underwater alarm clock had gone off, the reef burst to life with schools of fish flooding in from all sides.*

Clockwise from top left: Reef manta rays at a cleaning station; a pygmy seahorse; a school of fusiliers darts among sea fans; an anemonefish protects its young at a site in the Dampier Strait.

When EYOS Expeditions—a luxury expedition company that organizes yacht charters for epic adventures around the world, such as snorkeling with sperm whales in Dominica or beholding giant glaciers in the Arctic—invited me to join a group of writers for a Raja Ampat sailing with *Lamima*, I knew I wanted to bring someone who loved diving and understood what a trip to Raja Ampat meant. A snorkeler wouldn't cut it this time.

Serendipity intervened when Seth popped into my DMs that same day to comment on a photo I'd posted from the Bahamas about how much he missed blue water and the tropics.

I asked if he wanted to join me back in Indonesia. We got the all-systems-go from both of our (understanding) husbands to share a cabin, and before long we were meeting at the airport in Sorong.

#### WAKE-UP IN PARADISE

If diving in Raja Ampat was already a dream, doing it from *Lamima* was peak scuba fantasy.

Available only for private charter, the ship's all-inclusive experience includes Balinese, Shiatsu and Thai massages in the open-air spa at the stern; a fleet of water toys including hydrofoils, wakeboards and underwater scooters on standby; and exquisite Indonesian and international meals. Fancy kayaking alone in that sublime lagoon over yonder? The crew will drop you off and stay discreetly just out of sight, ready to tender you back in a hurry should your arms tire. How about a post-dive cold plunge? Consider it done in an ice-filled tub that magically appears on deck.

But for all the onboard perks, it was the diving I'd come for.

At sites such as Four Kings in

southern Misool, underwater pinnacles transfixed us with huge whirlpools of prey sliced through by bluefin trevally. The baitballs shifted and shimmered as muscular bodies stalked them with surgical precision.

Early one morning, the dive crew tendered us out into the darkness for something I'd never done before—a dawn dive.

Fish were few and far between when we dropped in a good half-hour before sunrise at Boo Window, where waving sea fans the size of a car made me feel like a character in a Seuss book. Suddenly, as if an underwater alarm clock had gone off, the reef burst to life with schools of fish flooding in from all sides. You could almost imagine they were commuting to work on underwater highways. It was the opposite of a night dive—the ocean was waking up—and we poked along the slope to spot pygmy seahorses, busybody anemonefish beginning their days and a wobbegong shark perfectly still, asleep in the sand.

Farther north, in the Dampier Strait, the current ripped at a site called Manta Sandy, but no mantas materialized. When we finally gave up and let the water propel us back the way we'd come, fields of xenia soft corals covering the reef were filter feeding with such enthusiasm—pulsing polyps reaching and grabbing everywhere—it was impossible not to see them as the animals they are. I have never been so blown away by coral.

#### A DIFFERENT POINT OF VIEW

Nondiving days aboard *Lamima* are just as spectacular.

One morning, we woke early to snorkel with dolphins drawn to a type of floating fishing platform known locally as a *bagan*. Their underwater acrobatics and breaths filled the water around us with bubbles. After a lunch of fresh lobster and fried noodles back on board *Lamima*, there was time for



wakeboarding among the karst peaks before heading out again to snorkel in one of Raja Ampat's hidden jellyfish lakes. We were the only humans jostling among stingless orbs that bobbed like wayward boules of champagne in the jade-green water.

*Lamima's* crew delights in surprises. Tired from the day's fun, I nearly skipped an afternoon cave visit in favor of a siesta—then Ali, a twinkle in his eye, simply told me he thought I'd regret it.

That was all the tease I needed



## THE BOAT

**Length**  
214 feet

**Passenger-to-Crew Ratio**  
14 passengers to 20 crew

**Staterooms**  
7 staterooms for 14 charter guests

**Amenities**  
A *Lamima* charter includes all diving; gear, including wet-suits, top-of-the-line regulators and BCDs; nitrox; all watersports [Jet Skis, eFoil boards, underwater scooters, wakeboarding, waterskiing, SUPs, kayaks and surfboards]; unlimited massages and beauty treatments; laundry; daily morning yoga sessions; and underwater and topside photos.

**Food/Drink**  
Chefs cater meals for each charter to meet the guests' desires, whether they prefer Western fare, vegetarian menus, or Sumatran, Javanese, Balinese and other specialties from across the Indonesian archipelago. Open bar [including cocktails, local beers and seven bottles of wine curated from the on-board list per night] is also included.

**Pricing**  
*Lamima* is only available as a full private charter for up to 14 guests. The rate is all-inclusive and starts at \$27,000 per night.

to hustle into the tender for the ride to Misool's Tomolol Cave, where we glided atop paddleboards through an entrance in the rock as high as a cathedral and into a dimly lit world of dripping formations, crystalline water and fluttering horse-shoe bats.

At sea level, it's easy to forget what a small piece each of the 1,500 islands and cays are in the greater jigsaw puzzle that makes up the Raja Ampat archipelago. A hike up higher is always rewarded with spectacular views, such

as the breathtaking heart-shaped lagoon we witnessed after a romp up above Karawapop Lagoon.

### A WINDOW INTO ANOTHER WORLD

In the village of Arborek, on a small cay in the Dampier Strait, we followed children down sandy lanes to a clearing where they performed cultural dances, wearing costumes festooned with cassowary feathers. Someone pointed to fins breaking the water's surface offshore, and Seth and I grabbed our masks and fins to snorkel from the

beach with oceanic mantas that had eluded us during our dives.

In the village of Marandan Weser on Batanta Island, a man macheted open coconuts, and we followed the lead of the children, scraping the jelly into our mouths with a bit of the husk, then jumping from the pier to rinse off in this incredible ocean that's their backyard. A gaggle of kids shrieked with glee as they attempted to balance on a log in the water. The weight of the world beyond this place had never felt further away.