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T H E L A S T P A R A D I S E

Nick Walton sails through the remote Eden of Raja Ampat
aboard the spectacular sailing superyacht *Lamima*

STORY BY NICK WALTON

Silence is a pretty rare thing these days. Sure, we might have moments of tranquillity from time to time, moments of mental respite, but in the modern world it is increasingly hard to find. However, it is silence, in all its profound glory, that greets us as the engine of our tender dies and we drift into a lagoon wreathed by towering limestone karsts that plummet down to deep topaz water.

Silence is par for the course here in one of Indonesia's most fragile maritime reserves. Perched at the eastern end of an archipelagic army of 17,000 islands that marches over 5,000 kilometres east to west, Raja Ampat is a welcome haven far from the bedlam of Asia's frantic cityscapes.

It has also, despite its remoteness, become one of the country's hottest destinations among eco-tourists and well-heeled adventure seekers.

After touching down in Sorong, the sleepy capital of Indonesia's Southwest Papua province (and a five-hour domestic flight from the distant capital, Jakarta), I follow a gaggle of excited foreign tourists, kitted out in new Gore-Tex and hauling shiny Rimowa luggage, who file out to meet guides from the armada of liveaboards and private charter yachts that visit this far-flung outpost between October and April.

Raja Ampat (or the 'Four Kings'), a 4.6 million hectare UNESCO-designated Biosphere Reserve in the heart of the Coral Triangle, comprises more than 1,500 islands, delivering the highest known concentration of marine life on the planet, from over 1,500 fish species and 75 per cent of the planet's coral species to whales, manta rays, whale sharks and turtles, and countless remote communities where traditions stay unperturbed by the tides of time.



Above: At 65.2 metres in length, Lamima is the largest wooden sailing yacht in the world and available for charter through EYOS Expeditions



A QUEEN AMONG THE KINGS

While there are a few simple guest houses and dedicated dive resorts perched on some of the larger islands, the best way — by far — to explore Raja Ampat is by luxury yacht, and if you're looking to do it in style, there's no vessel like the *Lamima*.

At 65.2 metres in length, with a beam of 11.20 metres and a draft of 3.70 metres, she is the largest wooden sailing yacht in the world, and from the moment she emerges from the early morning harbour haze, all sweeping bow and gleaming teak, the sight is nothing short of breathtaking. With exterior lines by Barcelona-based naval architect Marcelo Penna, who preserved the striking traditional phinisi profile while bestowing her with superyacht specifications, *Lamima* was constructed in Indonesian ironwood and teak on the island of Sulawesi by master builders Haji Baso and Haji Sakka. The result, launched in 2014, is a vessel that looks as though she has always belonged to these waters — ancient in spirit, yet impeccably modern in execution.

Powered by a MAN 1,000hp engine for manoeuvring in the archipelago's sheltered anchorages, the 491 GT *Lamima* is built for serious ocean work. Her main mast and topmast measure 50 metres overall, while the mizzen mast and topmast



◀ From left: Raja Ampat is an impressive ecosystem of hidden reefs and towering limestone formations; the *Lamima* is home to an array of water toys, including ever-popular kayaks

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reach 48 metres, with the entire rigging package weighing approximately 22 tonnes — a sail plan conceived not merely for aesthetics, but engineered for the steady trade winds that funnel through the Indonesian archipelago.

However, what stands *Lamima* apart is that she's also the only Indonesian-flagged yacht with RINA certification (and the only phinisi ever built to this international class standard), ensuring the highest standards of build quality and safety.

She's also no stranger to modern creature comforts. Seven ensuite cabins — one main deck

master suite with dressing room, and four spacious doubles and two twins on the lower deck — accommodate 14 guests in teak-lined bliss. Beyond, *Lamima's* expansive 400-square-metre decks offer a seafront setting for sun worshipping, relaxation and sundowners, while high-speed Starlink connectivity, glorious alfresco dining and an open-air massage suite hidden away at the stern ensure that even the most remote anchorage never feels entirely cut off from the world.

Below decks, an extraordinary array of water toys awaits, ranging from jet skis, E-foil electric boards, and



underwater scooters, to a sailing dinghy, wakeboards, water skis, surfboards, stand-up paddleboards, sea kayaks, and even a banana boat — all transported ashore by three tenders, including an 11-metre RIB.

Guests are doted on by a crew of 20 that includes dedicated wellness therapists, dive guides, chefs and bartenders only too ready to whip up a round of *Hemingway Daiquiris*.

JOURNEY TO THE SOUTH

After cruising through the night, we wake early off Pulau Balbulol, in southern Raja Ampat's diving mecca of Misool. Up on deck, I join my fellow guests, which includes Jen Martin, head of expeditions for *Lamima's* central booking agency, EYOS Expeditions, which specialises in the kind of bucket-list yacht charters that lead to book deals afterwards — think heliskiing in Greenland, wreck diving in the Solomons or deep-sea exploration by submersible, complete with dedicated photographers and videographers.

"Isn't this just amazing?" she says as we sip fortifying Sumatran coffee as light begins to fill the sky, revealing a cluster of tiny islands that resemble lime-green wine gums perched on silky navy seas. It's high praise from an intrepid world traveller like Martin.

Within an hour, we're perched in that otherworldly lagoon, a breathtaking place where time seems to stand as still as the protected waters, and where the silence competes only with the occasional call of sacred kingfishers.

We take turns to step from the tender, some deftly onto stand-up paddleboards, others (me included) tumbling into kayaks that allow us to drift effortlessly across gardens of branch coral that seem to reach up through the water, welcoming us across the threshold into Bal Bulol, a smaller lagoon hidden behind fangs of jungle-clad limestone.

After climbing a near-vertical ladder to a vertiginous viewpoint for the chance to gaze down across the twin lagoons, and a well-earned dip in the bathtub-warm waters, we return to the *Lamima* for a breakfast of rambutan, mangosteen and lip-smacking salak (snake fruit), heady coffee from Papua's Jayawijaya Highlands, and *bubur ayam*, Indonesian rice porridge laced with steamed chicken and fried shallots.

A GATEWAY TO EXPLORATION

Beyond *Lamima's* elegant lines and luxurious amenities, she grants access to one of the world's most remarkable marine environments. During our week-long journey, which lingers in the southern region of Misool, famed for its incredible soft corals and dramatic underwater caves, before returning to central Raja Ampat, best known for its strong currents and huge schools of fish, we explore both land and sea on a series of immersive excursions led by cruise director Ari, an ever-smiling native of Java.

While every Raja Ampat itinerary is at the whim of the weather, each welcomes new unforgettable adventures, from jet ski safaris through hidden coves to hikes through the Warkesi Forest Park in search of the elusive red bird-of-paradise.

On the island of Karawapop, we work off the

previous evening's sunset Negronis with a hike up the 600 steps to the viewpoint above the island's iconic, heart-shaped Love Lagoon, and brave an afternoon tempest in the waters of brackish Lenmakana Lake, a pint-sized pool filled with thousands of stranded, stingless golden jellyfish that samba gracefully among us as we snorkel.

Navigating past the sprawling Cendana Pearl Farm (which produces half a million pearls annually), we delve into Tomolol Cave, a cathedral-like sea grotto, forming a chain of kayaks and SUP boards as we follow *Lamima* builder and manager Dominique Gerardin, an experienced superyacht captain, into the inky darkness. We silently skim the mirror-like waters, headlamps scouring the ancient rock above — from which stalactites reach down like gnarled fingers — in search of napping horseshoe bats. Turning off our



A 50-strong pod of Indo-Pacific dolphins zip and zag effortlessly between wallowing humans as they snap up silvery bait fish



From above: Raja Ampat is famed as one of the world's greatest dive destinations; dolphins prowl beneath a traditional fishing bagan

headlamps, my wife Angela and I hold hands and let our kayak drift, and the feeling is like floating through the cosmos.

At the midway point of our trip, we rise with the dawn and slap on snorkelling equipment as we skim across the sea towards a fishing *bagan*, floating platforms used by Indonesian fishermen. Slipping into the water, we're greeted by the excitable sing-song chirps of a 50-strong pod of Indo-Pacific dolphins, who zip and zag effortlessly between wallowing humans as they snap up silvery bait fish thrown down by the grinning fishermen. The experience is nothing short of spectacular.

CREATURE COMFORTS AROUND

In keeping with its luxury expedition credentials, guests aboard the *Lamima* may be exploring remote, often rough-and-tumble terrain, but the finer things in life are never far from reach. With

each meal, served in the elegant saloon or alfresco under a canopy of stars, Chinese Indonesian head chef Yudha takes guests on a tour of the archipelago's fascinating culinary heritage, with earthy curries made from fish sourced from local fishermen along the route; zesty salads of crisp beans, potato and eggs in a fiery peanut sauce; tempeh and tofu simmered in turmeric and coconut milk; and hands down the best croissants I've ever had at sea. His chocolate chip cookies, which never last more than an hour outside the oven, become a de facto currency among guests looking to barter massage appointments or additional sunscreen rations.

One night, we sip martinis at twilight before taking the yacht's tender over to pint-sized Yefnabi Island, a speck of palm-encrusted sand, where the crew has set up a beach barbecue, complete with a gin and tonic station, a live band that favours ABBA covers, and fairy lights that dazzle gold off the indigo seas.

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There is a particular magic to sailing a vessel of this size and heritage through waters that have been navigated by her phinisi ancestors for centuries



IT'S ANOTHER WORLD DOWN BELOW

Of course, beyond its hidden coves and towering peaks, Raja Ampat is most famous for its remarkable diving, earning it the moniker the ‘Amazon of the Seas’ for its spectacular biodiversity. *Lamima*’s onboard PADI dive centre carries equipment for all guests alongside a Bauer Nitrox compressor, with two PADI-certified dive instructors leading unlimited dives at Indonesia’s premier sites.

Led by ever-eager guides Ali and Martinez, divers explore new sites every day, from remote Boo Windows, with its twin “window” swim-throughs a favourite with Napoleon wrasse, whitetip reef sharks

and wobbegongs; and Four Kings, a quartet of submerged underwater pinnacles surrounded by a thick carpet of vibrant soft corals; to Manta Point, an acclaimed cleaning station that sometimes sees more than 20 giant oceanic mantas congregate.

THE FACES OF RAJA AMPAT

That said, with the required cruising from island to island, there’s always time to soak up the sunshine, indulge in Balinese massages, or even brave a post-hike dip in the teak ice bath. Afternoons cruising are perhaps the most quietly spectacular moments of the voyage. There is a particular magic to sailing a vessel



Clockwise from above: A guest rides an E-foil scooter; Raja Ampat is home to 75% of the world’s coral species; a voyage often includes visits to remote communities where traditions are proudly preserved

of this size and heritage through waters that have been navigated by her phinisi ancestors for centuries.

One evening, we’re invited to the broad upper deck to watch Indonesia’s many cultures come to life, with crew from Sulawesi, Sumatra, Java, Papua and Bali performing timeless dances in intricate traditional attire, and we begin to get a sense of the complex cultural tapestry that echoes across Indonesia’s countless islands.

With the crew’s songs still lingering in our minds, the next morning we have a chance to see a more contemporary take on this remarkable region, visiting the young researchers of the StAR Project on the postcard-perfect island of Kri, where endangered zebra sharks are being hatched and rewilded. In the organisation’s research hub, we gaze down into Jacuzzi-sized holding tanks where new foot-long shark pups dart in circles, the light shimmering off their leopard-like spots.

On our final foray, we encounter Raja Ampat’s next generation of conservationists, dive guides and advocates in the remote village of Aborek, home to only 300 inhabitants, where children from the one-room school perform a dance dedicated to the white-bellied sea eagles that live along Waigeo’s mountainous coastline. Dominique first visited this remote settlement 13 years ago (by dugout canoe) when the *Lamima* was still a pipedream, and on his first visit since, the community elders welcome him like a returning son.

As the drumming ends and the children, their skin glistening with sweat in the late afternoon heat, break into post-performance giggles, the village chief announces the arrival of mantas, and, steps away, on the white sandy beach, we can see the occasional flap of a fin on the water’s surface only a few metres out.

Within minutes, as the sun grows heavy in the western sky, we’re in the water, gliding beside and occasionally above a trio of majestic rays, regular visitors (often in the company of dugongs) to this remote island haven.

Back at the *Lamima*, as the last rays of sunlight fade from the violet sky and the anchor chain rattles gently from the depths once more, we toast to this close encounter, to another day’s adventure and to the unforgettable memories gleaned from a week immersed in Indonesia’s own Eden.

lamima.com
eyos-expeditions.com