

# Raja Ampat impressions

by Albert Kok

Trips to Raja Ampat start and end in Sorong, Papua New Guinea. Most people fly to Jakarta, Bali, or Singapore first. My late November trip went from Amsterdam via a 2 stops in Medan to Jakarta. Here I spent 8 hours rest in the airport hotel that helped to break up the long trip, before starting the final leg – a night flight- to Sorong.

All my flights were with Garuda, a member of Sky team that checked my heavy 26 kilo bag through from Amsterdam to Sorong without any additional charges. I carried a second 10 kilo roller bag with the camera lenses with me. I here report my major impressions of the trip, without going too much into all the details.

The region The Indonesian archipelago of Raja Ampat (Indonesian for 'Four Kings') is part of the Coral Triangle that stretches from the Philippines to Timor to Papua New Guinea. Extending over more than 24,000 square kilometers, the archipelago of Raja Ampat, with its four large islands Waigeo, Batanta, Salawati and Misool and its more than 1,500 islets, is home to the last remaining nature preserves in their pure state, seemingly unaltered by

modern civilization.

The islands are located in a region on the western border of the equatorial Pacific Ocean and at the Northeastern 'entrance' of the Indonesian Through flow from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean. The high marine diversity in Raja Ampat must be related to its favorable position between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, as coral and fish larvae are more easily shared between the two oceans.

The four larger islands make up the vast majority of the landmass in the area, but are surrounded by numerous other small islands, some of which are part of atolls, covered with green jungle forest and surrounded by blue water and strips of white sandy beaches. The smaller mushroom (or: beehive?) shaped 'karst' (limestone) islets, create a unique landscape of spectacular rock islands that dominate the region. Especially the more remote locations south of Misool looked like a tropical paradise, far from the rest of the world worrying about climate change, environmental pollution and the loss of biodiversity.

In many respects our boat, the

*Nikon D7200,  
Ikelite housing,  
Tokina 10-17,  
14.0 mm, dual DS  
161 strobes, f11.0,  
1/160, ISO 200*





*Olympus E-EPL5, Olympus 8mm, dual DS 161 strobes, f11.0, 1/60, ISO 200*

Indo-Siren, was the ideal live-aboard, with spacious cabins, excellent cooking and perfect assistance of the super friendly Indonesian crew in accompanying each dive, checking our cylinder pressure and nitrox level and helping us getting in and out the three dinghies. We had our own drawers, enough electrical charging stations, free beers and free gear rental. Everyone had their own numbered station, and plenty of room to suit up. Briefings by our Anglo-American dive supervisor Tristan were short but adequate with a general

emphasis on ‘no solo’ diving and the details of the diving site. During our 9 days itinerary in which most divers were able to log 30 dives, we followed the north to south and back to north, route. This went from Sorong to the northern island of Batanta, then south to Daram and Pelee south of Misool, and back north again to the Dayang, Pianemo, Kri and Blue Magic sites, south of Waigeo. Batanta is known for its “muck diving” where critter seekers have a chance to spot the blue ring octopus, pygmy seahorse, and nudibranchs of all



*Nikon D7200, Ikelite housing, Tokina 10-17, 10mm, dual DS 161 strobes, f11.0, 1/125, ISO 200*

shapes and colors. Kri, Blue magic and Tapokren jetty are dive sites at the western edge of Dampier Strait in the northern section of Raja Ampat. Here vibrant schools of fish thrive in the strong currents of the strait south of GAM island. The crew did a pretty good job of timing our dives so we never saw divers from other boats underwater.

The underwater world of Raja Ampat contains an amazing number of stony corals (Scleractinia) and huge gorgonian fans covered with crinoids, and more than 1,700

species of reef fish. The famous ichthyologist, Dr. Gerald Allen, also the author of the excellent fish guide of the Indo-Pacific ocean, claimed to have counted over 280 fish species on a single dive! With its abundance of fusiliers, jacks, napoleon wrasse, bumphead parrotfish, tuna, batfish, several trevally species, sweetlips, snappers, and rainbow runners it's no wonder the Raja Ampat area is reputed to have the greatest diversity of marine life on earth. Occasional sightings included mobula rays, turtles and a couple of sharks that



*Olympus E-EPL5, Olympus 8mm, dual DS 161 strobes, f 11.0, 1/100, ISO 200*

kept their distance. We missed larger groups of barracuda. The night dives, some at the piers, had loads of macro subjects, such as blue ring octopus, bobtail squid, ghost pipefish and pygmy seahorses. The current was a major factor of most of the dives. Where the current strikes the offshore reefs, it often splits, attracting a dazzling variety of congregating fish, such as pulsating masses of sweepers, yellow snappers, fusiliers pursued by huge giant trevallies, packs of bluefin

jacks and huge Spanish mackerel. And not to forget the batfish swarming in groups. A great thrill were the reef Mantas that we encountered at Magic mountain (a submerged reef south of Misool) and in the north, hovering over a shallow sandy cleaning station plateau. Other spectacular sights were the dense groups of hundreds of jacks and various species of sweetlips (*Plectorhinchus*) huddling together.

My buddy Jack and I were the only two experienced UW



*Nikon D7200, Ikelite housing, Tokina 10-17, 10.0 mm, dual DS 161 strobes, f13.0, 1/125, ISO 200*

photographers in the 16 persons group of mixed nationalities. Curiously enough, although our dives were categorized as 'macro' and 'wide angle' dives, critter seeking by the dive guides formed a central element of most dives. Being the only diver with a fish-eye lens on my Nikon as well as Olympus rig this initially caused some frustration. This was when I had to follow the group, with little time to linger behind on occasional interesting spots higher

up the reef. During a drift dive or a situation of lower visibility this easily leads to a loss of eye contact with the group, creating inevitably a 'solo diver' situation. Luckily, Laura the American assistant dive master was so kind to accompany me during a number of dives, which I otherwise would have finished with a solo ascent and release of the marker buoy. The dinghy captains were always attentive and divers surfacing were always spotted and transported



*Nikon D7200, Ikelite housing, Tokina 10-17, 11.5 mm, dual DS 161 strobes, f11.0, 1/125, ISO 200*

directly to the boat were they were treated with a refreshment served by hostess Ing. The dinghies were equipped with ladders which made climbing in a lot easier.

The guided group system of Indo Siren is a excellent and safe option when diving in more difficult conditions such as low visibility, strong currents, or when exploring new and photogenic diving locations. Given that the divers share a common (exploratory) interest and have no specific buddies. In my earlier UW

photographers-only workshops, most divers were used to follow a more individual diving plan. Here the dive supervisors usually follow a lenient regime with respect to the rules of buddy and group diving. The take home message is: when you book on a non-workshop dive trip be sure that there is a 'buddy' (that is: a person in the group) that is willing to stay with you. Especially when you have a specific photo (e.g. wide angle) interest, that may not follow the dive plan of the guided group.



*Nikon D7200, Ikelite housing, Tokina 10-17, 10.0 mm, dual DS 161 strobes, f11.0, 1/80, ISO 200*

Summing up, Raya Ampat has been an amazingly rich diving experience on a excellent live-aboard boat. Schools of fish of different species with a great variety of colors, sizes and shapes swarmed around the islands, with a stunning array of colored stony corals and gorgonians as a background. Mantas showed up at different locations, while the pretty-much constant sunshine and high water temperatures created a comfortable diving environment. As compared with the Red Sea,

underwater visibility may not always be optimal, and around the island, in particular the submerged reefs, there can be pretty strong currents constantly splitting in direction. I hope that pictures that go with the article illustrate -at least a part- of this magic underwater world!

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# *Don't settle for 2nd best*



Film - No Filter No  
White Balance



Digital - No Filter Manual  
White Balance



Magic Filter Manual  
White Balance

Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards. These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter, using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

*[www.magic-filters.com](http://www.magic-filters.com)*