

Raja Empat - the New Nirvana

by Will Postlethwaite

How do you choose the destination for your next dive trip? As a photographer there are a number of criteria you want to satisfy but in the end there is always a compromise to be made. However, if you after calm, clear water with abundant life including some of the most unusual and rare species to be found, amazing topography cradling the most pristine coral reefs in the world and not another diver in sight then there is a place that scores an easy 10/10, Raja Empat.

These islands of the 'Four Kings' are off the north west tip of West Papua and with the recent introduction of a daily flight link to Manado are the latest and hottest destination.

The lid really came off in April 2002 when a group of top marine biologists released an assessment of the coral reefs and fishes of the archipelago.

Gerald Allen recorded more fish species in one dive (283) than he had ever seen before and J.E.N Veron identified more coral species and in the best condition than anywhere else on the planet. Truly unsurpassed in every way.

A dive at the house reef off the island of Kri, where Gerry Allen logged his record, or at the nearby Chicken Reef is a experience like no other. Time and again your attention is grabbed by yet another new potential shot. You do not know where to point your lens next!

The number of fish is staggering at all the sites in the seas around these little islands but in the group called Fam two



Nikon F90 in a Subal housing, 20mm lens, 2 x Sea & Sea YS120 strobes on Full power, 1/60th@F8. Fuji Provia 100F.

submerged reefs, named Andy's Reef and Demelza's Delight by the crew of our boat, are washed by strong currents and give a daily spectacle that rivals that of the Sardine Run for fish density. Shooting up past the brilliant soft corals straining in the breeze the swaying dark mass of fish blots

out the sun dropping you a stop or two! The coral cover is so dense that there is no place for a reef hook but a little finning is worth it for the show.

Also part of Fam are Melissa's Garden and Anita's Garden, plateau reefs around 10m deep that are dripping with

colour derived from fans, other soft corals, anemones, anthias and glassfish. Little bommies and islands provide stunning wide angle backdrops to the huge plates of hard coral, metres in diameter, beneath which hide Tassled Wobbegongs that occasionally come out and swim sinuously by. After one dive at Melissa's Garden the boat boy wondered how we had failed to spot the dolphins and Minke Whales that passed by the reef. You really need eyes in the back of your head on these reefs.

The islands are made of limestone karst from ancient coral and their jagged sharpness makes life hard for plants and animals alike. The population density is therefore very low and thus the usual human pressures have not been exerted here. Straddling the equator and forming their own natural barrier, storms and El Ninos also seem to have passed the area by so so that huge sea fans grow undamaged and literally touch the surface of the water. One weird consequence of this protective topography is Kaboei Passage. This small gap between two islands of the Waigeo group feeds into a large bay.

When the tide runs in and out the passage acts like a river and life clings to the banks fed by the flow. With flat calm water the opportunity abounds for bizarre split and through the surface shots showing untouched rainforest bending down to meet pristine coral reef reaching up while little archerfish eye insects on the branches above.

Travelling into Kaboei Bay is a muck divers dream where there is untold super macro for nudibranchs, frogfish and shrimp.

The abundance of sessile



Nikon F90 in a Subal housing, 105mm lens, Inon Quad flash, TTL, 1/80th@F16. Fuji Velvia.



Nikon F90 in a Subal housing, 20mm lens, 2 x Sea & Sea YS120 strobes, TTL, 1/80th, Auto. Fuji Provia 100F.

life on every reef affords plenty of hiding places so macro shots are everywhere. Wacky decorator crabs, cowries and gobies stare out from beneath branches and polyps. But the real macro sensation of Raja Ampat is the incredible number of pygmy seahorses. Not just pink and not just Hippocampus bargibanti but the newly named Hippocampus denise in every colour imaginable and many different types of fan, even one only 11m deep.

Your trip will also be punctuated by sailfish, marlin and manta leaping from the ocean right next to your boat. You can scour rafts of weed for Sargassum Frogfish and trek into the rainforest in search of the rarest Birds of Paradise and bizarre waterfalls. These, however, are just some of the unique and special aspects of this amazing archipelago. The waters are full of every type of pipefish, nudibranch and anemone fish imaginable and there are sites like those off Wai where you can dive with mantas while inspecting an untouched WW.II fighter plane with a pink pygmy seahorse under its wing. Further east there are more

unlooted wrecks of cruisers and battleships from WWII.

For ten years this area has been a difficult region to visit and only one dive operator, Irian Diving, was based here but now there is a resident liveaboard, the Shakti, and a few other boats run short itineraries. The islands will never get crowded but when you get to dive reefs that have never been dived before or have had maybe less than a thousand divers ever to swim over them then you notice the potential for human damage. This is one of the planet's most special and unique places and Michael Aw is campaigning to get it registered as a protected area. We urge divers to visit this stunning dive destination and by doing so put money into the region to help the local population conserve what really is diving nirvana.

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