

Four Kings and an Ace

by Peter Rowlands

Raja Ampat has, for some time, been the 'must go' location - teeming with fish life and adorned by pristine corals. It has spawned superlatives from top underwater photographers who have dived there and their images have certainly confirmed the recommendation.

But what if you were offered more than Raja Ampat? What if, after your first few dives in RA en route to an almost undived area further south, as you got back into the dive tender babbling about how amazing it all was and the best you'd ever seen, you were told, quite seriously, "You ain't seen nothing yet!" Such was the confidence of one Graham Abbott of Diving 4 Images.

Graham has been a dive guide for over 7 years and he came to realise that keen underwater photographers need to be provided with something not quite 'out of the box'. He started Diving 4 Images to cater for those who had specific photographic needs in terms of subjects or who wanted to operate in an underwater photography friendly environment. The former



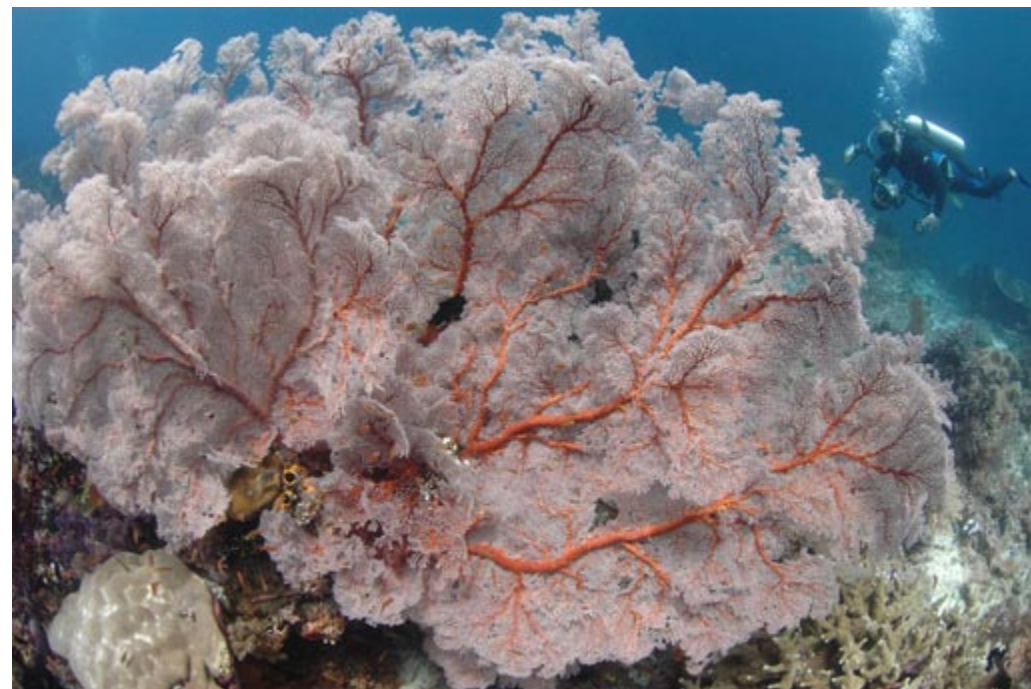
(Right) The corals are pristine and so big that you need a large object such as Alex Mustard in the background to give a sense of scale.

Nikon D70, Subal housing, 10.5mm lens, Magic filter available light, 400asa 100th @ F5.6

tended to be clients like professional cameramen like Peter Scoones and Norbert Wu or fish experts like Gerry Allen whilst the latter were above average underwater photographers who wanted to maximise their time underwater and concentrate on their images. He provides a very personal service backed up by his extensive



'Seahorse' is a new liveaboard which operates in the Raja Ampat region offering a variety of schedules to some of the most remote diving in the region.



knowledge of the diving world, its prime locations and its exotic and sometimes rare inhabitants.

Diving 4 Images have recently teamed up with the liveaboard 'Seahorse' to provide what I think is a new and exciting combination where the boat owner/skipper looks after the boat/catering and Graham/D4I organise the diving. The owner/builder of 'Seahorse' is an amiable Spaniard called Txus (pronounced like Juice) and he has spent the past two years building the boat locally to a traditional design.

And so it was that I was travelling with Alex Mustard in the slipstream of his latest project (which he won't let me tell you about) to a location which Graham would rather I didn't tell you about in too much detail!

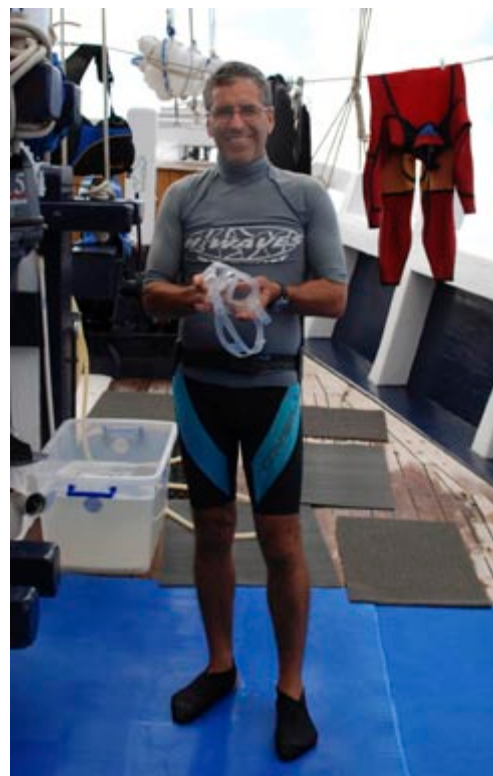
For our trip 'Seahorse' was operating out of Sorong which, flying from the UK, meant London-Singapore, Singapore-Manado, overnight there and Manado-Sorong the following day. Like all 'on the edge' destinations you must be prepared for lengthy travel times. I have no problem with that as, nowadays, you have to go further and further afield to experience untouched diving.

What I do have a problem with, however, is being charged £40 per kilo excess baggage by Singapore

Airlines at Heathrow. They graciously waived me some extra baggage allowance but still presented me with a bill for £250 (that's nearly \$500 at today's exchange rate or to be more melodramatic, seven hundred and eighteen million, six hundred and ten thousand Lira). Not a good start to a trip especially when my dive bag then got left in Singapore and I had to pay extra to have it forwarded to arrive half way through the trip! Remember it was Singapore Airlines who did this to me. I certainly won't forget them when flying to this part of the world again...

Once on board 'Seahorse' I was generously loaned some dive gear by Tzus which saved the day. I normally travel with a full wet suit but all that was available was a 'shorty'. If you will allow me, I will refer back to this later in my report.

Being a seasoned traveller I carry some back up, stick on lenses for my optical mask which, if you remember, was still in Singapore courtesy of Singapore Airlines. These are small semi-circular flexible lenses which can be attached to the bottom of a standard mask to make sure I can see close up detail underwater. I'd never had to use them in the past because all the other airlines I have used have delivered my bags much more cheaply and efficiently than Singapore Airlines...



Tzus (pronounced like Juice) owner/builder of 'Seahorse' can't decide whether to go for a dive or enter the Tour de France.

Having attached these lenses in the correct position with the recommended layer of spit I felt sure I would be able to operate photographically to the best of my abilities and for a while, everything went well. It was only when I had to clear my mask that the lenses started to float around and I found myself flicking my head to try and



Belgian dive guide Olivier (left) discusses the next dive while Graham Abbott of Diving 4 Images concentrates on getting the marker pen back into the jar.

get them back into position like some infuriating Christmas puzzle involving small balls and impossibly small retaining holes. I came up after the first dive looking like the late great Marty Feldman. Fortunately I was rescued by fellow traveller Scott Marshall who loaned me his spare, excellent, Seavision optical mask and the rest is visual history.



*One of our first dives was in a pristine mangrove habitat complete with archer fish.
Nikon D2x, Subal housing, 10.5mm lens 100asa, 160th @ F8
(Photo Alex Mustard)*

For the first couple of days on our voyage south from Sorong we aimed to dive during the day and make passage overnight but on the first night the currents were against us and we had not got as far as we'd planned. Graham apologised but suggested we check out our present location which turned out to be a pristine mangrove habitat up an Amazon-like channel complete with archer fish and a beautiful combination of colours as brackish fresh water met clean blue seawater.

There was a real pioneering feel as our diving tenders eased up the channel. A real feeling of seeing nature at its undisturbed best. How strong and healthy it appears yet how easily it has been decimated in most of the developed world.

Our voyage south continued away from Raja Ampat with dives on some of the healthiest, most pristine coral habitats I have ever experienced complete with a vibrancy of fish life which was constant, fed by the nutrient-rich currents. Nature rarely



The dictionary definition of pristine is 'pure, uncorrupted' and the reefs around Fak Fak are testament to that.

Nikon D70, Subal housing, 10.5mm lens, Magic filter available light, 400asa 100th @ F4

On nearly every dive you could shoot either wide angle or macro and always find suitable subjects.

Nikon D80, Ikelite housing, 60mm lens, Ikelite 125 strobe, TTL, 1/125th @ F16





The diving around the islands on our way south to Fak Fak was very impressive with underwater rock formations providing unusual compositions. Nikon D70, Subal housing, 10.5mm lens, Magic filter available light, 400asa 125th @ F5.6



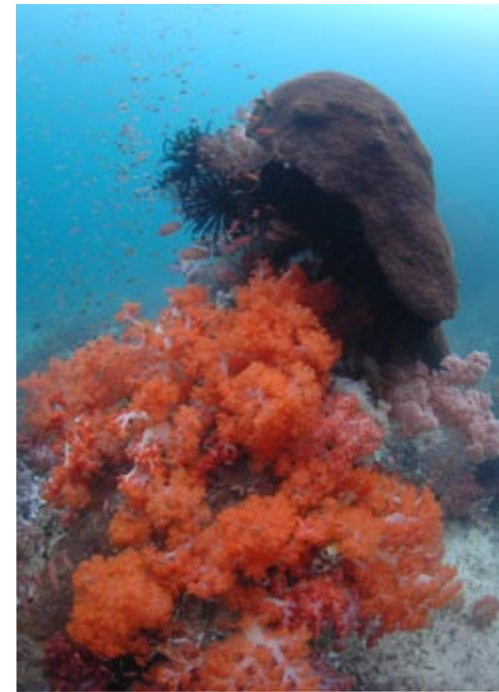
lets you have your cake and eat it though and the visibility was never crystal but, for our trip, always workable. I am certainly no marine biologist but I think I can recognise a harmonic environment when I see one and I've never before seen such perfection underwater. I'm sorry to bang on but it was absolutely breathtaking. Fortunately Alex, who is a well travelled marine biologist, confirmed my uneducated observations. After one particular dive we were both lost for words, which, if you know either of us, is quite unusual.

By now we were into the special location Graham doesn't want me to detail and I can understand why but from a slightly differing viewpoint. He is never happier finding exotic creatures underwater, he knows their names by heart and has photographed them superbly, armed with just a simple digital compact camera and built in flash. For me, however, this was a location of combinations each of which built to form a complete experience. Here we were on an excellent,



Our final destination was my image of 'The Lost World' complete with human remains, untouched palm fringed beaches and teeming underwater life. Nikon D70, Subal housing, 10.5mm lens, Magic filter available light, 400asa 100th @ F5.6





(Above) The icing on the cake was finding and photographing an unnamed species of epaulette shark which walks on the seabed. Alex Mustard photographed it on a night dive and, the very next day, I was thrilled to find and photograph (above centre) a new species of hard coral which will now be called Darth Vader coral. (Top right) The barrel sponges were the size of hot tubs. (Bottom right) A fire urchin provides a home for two Coleman’s shrimps.

traditional liveaboard with the surface topography resembling my image of ‘The Lost World’ and an underwater environment where everything was larger than life. I’m sure Darwin would have got excited all over again.

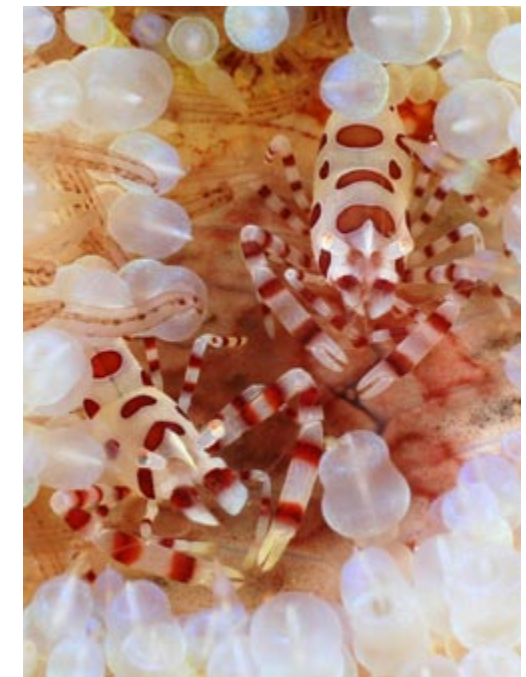
The other ten guests on board were very well travelled and all agreed that the fish in particular were larger and more profuse than they had seen and then it dawned on my simple brain. Here was an area that was only fished from local canoes for personal

consumption. Industrial man had not been here and should never be allowed anywhere near. The natural topography of this location makes it ideal to conserve and protect and I understand that concerted efforts are now underway to achieve this.

By now Graham’s marine biological bent was going into overdrive. He knew something we didn’t and he wanted to show us. On the first night dive it eluded him but on the second he found his prey

– an unnamed species of epaulette shark which walks on the seabed. Dr Mustard was on hand to capture it on camera and I was instrumental in suggesting a name for the dive site, ‘Walkers Patch’. Time alone will tell if the name sticks. Time has already confirmed that this is a virtually unexplored area which will no doubt reveal more such unnamed or new species.

All good things must end however and we steamed back to catch





the flight out of Kaimana.

The return journey involved several flights - Kaimana–Ambon, Ambon-Makasar, Makasar-Bali, Bali-Singapore and finally Singapore-London. Unfortunately there was a problem with the flight out of Kaimana. Also unfortunately there are only two flights a week out of Kaimana! Alex and I had built in some overnights en route just in case but this wasn't enough. All of a sudden we all found ourselves with very little money stranded in a location which didn't recognize other foreign currencies, didn't have a cash machine that recognized our credit cards and didn't have a reliable internet connection even on dial up!

Eventually thanks to the sterling work of Graham, Tzus and the amazing Ci Ci all our flights were reworked in some way or other and we were loaned local currency. I'm not sure what schedule Seahorse plans for 2007 but if I were you I'd build in a more than usual time buffer both before and after this trip. In fact I wouldn't call it a trip. Think it more of an expedition and you'll go with the right mindset.

Which brings me finally to my borrowed 'shorty' wetsuit... True it fitted fine and kept me warm but, being used to a full wetsuit, my exposed, chubby legs felt vulnerable. It wasn't really a problem most of the time but I did lose my photographic



concentration totally on one dive when, for a third time in as many minutes, a substantial remora came from behind and tried to attach itself to my fleshy inner thigh. With hindsight I should have been flattered but it wasn't very funny at the time and, as far as I'm concerned, it's still not that funny.

Peter Rowlands
peter@uwpmag.com

For further information visit
www.diving4images.com

