

Book Review

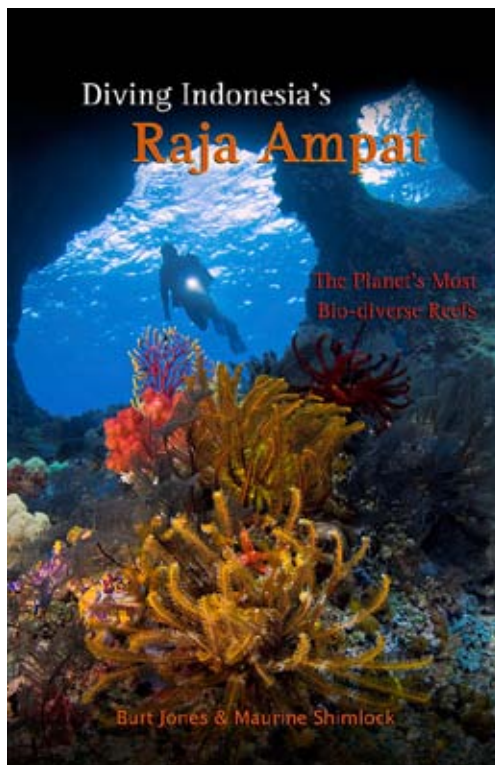
Book Review: Diving Indonesia's Raja Ampat

by Jones and Shimlock

By Alex Mustard

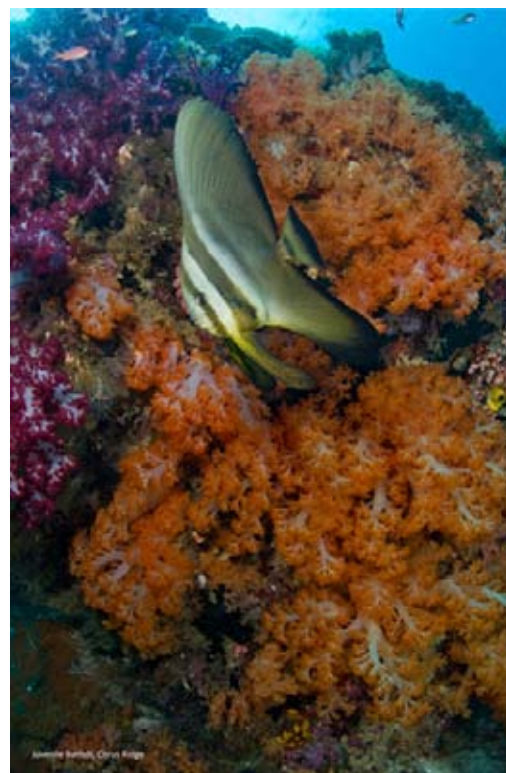
Over the last decade Raja Ampat has become, deservedly, one of the most desirable diving destinations in the world. The region is home to more than 1000 species of fish and over 70% of the world's hard coral species, and perhaps of even more interest to the diving experience, some of the most breathtaking underwater scenes imaginable. When UWP Editor, Peter Rowlands, and I, first visited we spent the most of the first week coming out of the water continually pronouncing "No, that was my best coral reef dive ever!"

The excellent, new 146 page **Diving Indonesia's Raja Ampat** by Burt Jones and Maurine Shimlock is, to date, the only diving guidebook published about the archipelago. It is an honest, respectful, engaging and sumptuously illustrated description of the diving opportunities in this unique and important region. Its packed with information naturally.



The book has been produced in cooperation with Conservation International and starts with detailed explanations of the unique biodiversity and the reasons for it. It also introduces the holistic and considered conservation strategy for the region and its links with the local community. The majority of the pages are dedicated to the diving, sensibly dividing the archipelago into bite-sized morsels, giving a general introduction to the area's dives before detailed site descriptions.

The book contains more than 130 dive site descriptions complete



with GPS coordinates and diving directions. Dive sites are listed with both Indonesian island names and English names. It reviews all the famous sites, but Jones and Shimlock are keen to encourage us to dive the less celebrated sites as well, to fully appreciate Raja Ampat's defining characteristic – diversity.

This publication is well timed. Until recently Raja Ampat was not well explored. Many cruise directors had their favourite route and many had not dived that widely in the islands. As recently as 2006, one "expert" advised me that my planned

Pulau Yanggelo 4 & 5

Cinus Ridge
GPS: S 00 30 646 E 130 27 348
Gam Ridge
GPS: S 00 30 577 E 130 27 296
Location: Channel between Pulau Yanggelo and Gam
Photography: Wide angle and macro
Best depth: 3 – 30 meters

Cinus Ridge is one of Raja Ampat's most stunning sites. The sloping sides of the ridge are so covered with life that most divers compare the dive to swimming through a well-stocked aquarium. The shallower bommies on north (local) side have some of the most spectacular soft corals in northern Raja Ampat. In a current, vast stretches of spectacular orange corals open and feed while Barracuda, Batfish, and Surgefinfish swirl overhead. Pairs of Imperial and Blue Angelfish circle the bommies, and Lionfish usually hover close to the reef while hunting among glimmering schools of batfish. Cinus Ridge can be dived either from the inside of the channel to the outside or in the opposite direction depending on the current. Our favorite profile is to start at the deeper southern end and swim north, exploring both sides as well as the crest of the ridge.

Gam Ridge is on the Gam side of the channel and runs north of west into the ocean. This is a wide expanse of coral that begins at the surface and drops off into deeper water. Lovely soft corals and small sea fans highlight this reef, which also can be full of fish. This side of the channel also makes a great night dive. The best day dive takes place around 20 meters and is a current-dependent drift that focuses on watching Fusiliers and Surgefinfish school around this ridge's colorful bommies.

Pulau Yanggelo 6, 7, 8

Mangrove Ridge
GPS: S 00 30 780 E 130 27 589
Mangroves and Slope
GPS: S 00 30 824 E 130 27 714
Ga's Fleck
GPS: S 00 30 701 E 130 27 309
Location: Mangrove channel between Gam and Yanggelo
Photography: Wide angle and macro
Best depth: Surface to 30 meters

These three sites are located in the mangrove channel that separates Yanggelo



trip to SE Misool was a waste of time!

The last few seasons have seen a change in attitude, cruise directors have pooled their knowledge and itineraries are much more diverse. Also more boats have meant more divers and more exploration. **Diving Indonesia's Raja Ampat** completes this process, accruing this knowledge.

That said it is important to stress that Raja Ampat covers a massive area and will never be fully explored underwater. No book could cover it comprehensively. Sensibly, the authors encourage readers on several occasions to keep exploring.

I have never met the authors, but I feel they would make excellent liveaboard companions. They balance the need to provide authoritative information with a humility in their writing that gives the text a most engaging tone. They deal with the recent crocodile attack in the Nampale mangroves sensibly and sensitively.

I particularly enjoyed how quotes from famous explorers are woven into the narrative, especially where quotes are linked to places you will actually visit. Reading the one hundred and fifty year old words of British naturalist Alfred Russell Wallace about the famous Passage dive site was a real thrill. What a great way to whet the appetite for a dive there.

Photographically the book has some excellent images, particularly wide angle, which would look even better in a larger format. However, the small size and light weight make this book a highly suitable travel companion. The wide angle photos are of a good standard and will provide some inspiration for photographers on their travels. The fish photographs are not as standout, which I believe reflects the fact that despite being home to 1320 species of our finned friends, Raja Ampat is not the best location for fish photography. The fish there just sometimes seem a bit wild! That said the selection of images gives an excellent impression of the

diversity of life and scenery.

Negatives are hard to find in a book that so accurately fulfils its brief. It would be nice if the dive sites were labelled on the maps with names, rather than just location flags. Diving depths are listed only in metres, which means a bit of mathematics for those who don't dive metric. And it seems strange that diagrams have been included for just a handful of sites. But I am nit-picking here.

In summary, this is an ideal book whether you are curious about Raja Ampat, considering it serious or have already been. Even R4 veterans will learn something and enjoy reliving old memories. The book is the perfect size to travel with and costs a very reasonable \$25 USD. But the price tag should come with a warning: reading it is highly likely to cost you much more. As I turned the pages I found that the words and pictures of Jones and Shimlock left me desperate to be back amongst the wonders of Raja Ampat.

Highly recommended. Achieves everything it sets out to, for a competitive price.

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