

Raja Ampat

The Green Labyrinth

By Carlos Virgili

We have travelled to Indonesia many a time as it's one of our favourite diving spots. And whenever we choose the live aboard system, we always opt for the Ondina, a traditional "pinisi" adapted for scuba diving. A few years back we spent some time in Papua, but in Triton Bay which we loved, and even though a lot has been written about Raja Ampat we hadn't had the opportunity to visit it since it became a "World Class" destination.

Looking down from the window of the plane at the immense mass of green forest of this great island, my imagination began to plunge into its waters and the tangled jungle.

After a briefing with our Cruise Director, we raised anchor and headed north. Even though Indonesia and the Ondina are now like a second home to us, we had never been to Raja Ampat which we had heard so much about; and to be quite honest we were keen to get there.

Oh, by the way we've forgotten to introduce ourselves. We're the photographer and model Carlos and

Celia from Barcelona now based in the Costa Brava much closer to our Mediterranean Sea.

Whilst we are sailing, I stroll around the ship refreshing my memory. At the stern of the ship there is a shaded area where all of the scuba diving equipment is kept and set up from the first day to the last. Furthermore, you don't have to lug the bottles down to the zodiacs – it's all done for you. I see that the bottles are new, with practical covers to protect them from rubbing against the other equipment. Wow, what a luxury!

The photographers' area is just behind the equipment room and has a big table with shelving below and two small water trays for sweetening up our "offspring."

Outside at the bow, there is a glass-top table and benches where you can sit down to eat or rest between dives; a very popular spot to watch the very moving Indonesian sunsets.

The lounge next door has benches rather than the "sliding chairs" you tend to find on other cruises. What a great idea! ... I see



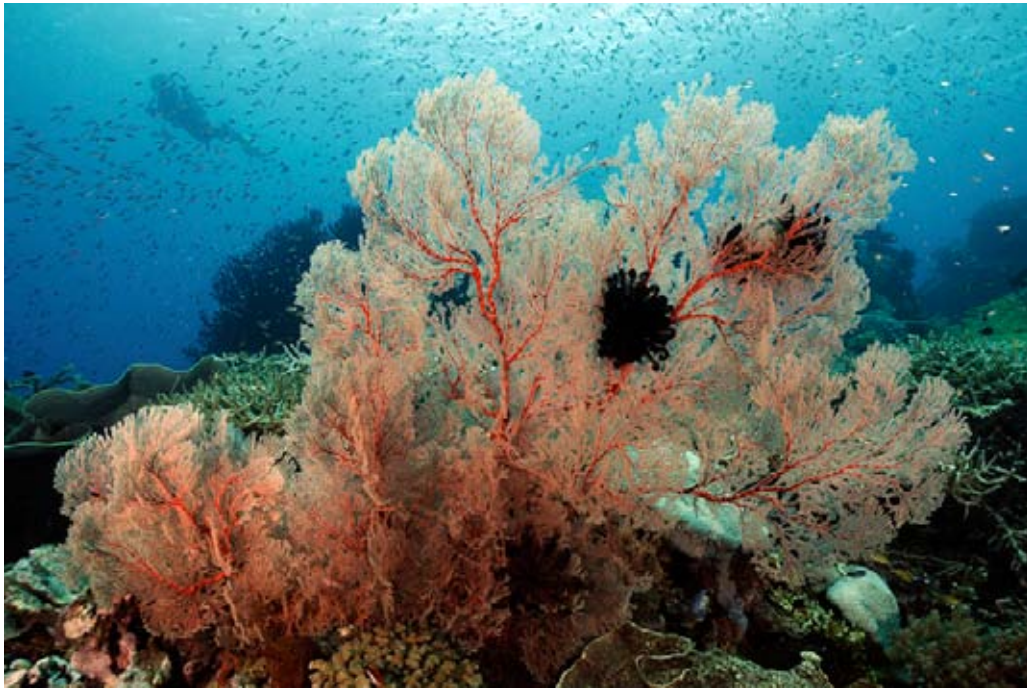
The famous jetty of Airborek. Nikon D300, Subal housing, 2 Inon Z-240, strobes, 10mm, ISO200 1/100 F13

The nice reef off the island called Pulau. Nikon D300, Subal housing, 2 Inon Z-240, strobes, 10mm, ISO200 1/320 F22

they've got a new plasma screen but they've still got the original sound system, which they promise to change this year! There are plugs under the tables to connect our laptops or a popcorn machine (or whatever takes your fancy...)

One thing I've always liked about this organisation is that on the





The impressive sea fans located on Fiabacet. Nikon D300, Subal housing, 2 Inon Z-240, strobes, 10mm, ISO200 1/80 F13

first day you're always given a kind of folder which you can use as a logbook throughout the trip, and in the dining room there is a map of the islands, all with unpronounceable names, indicating where we are.

After the standard "check dive", our cruise really begins with a night dive in the same waters as earlier on, but because we are still close to the populated areas, it wasn't really worthwhile; no doubt there'll be better dives to come. Curiously enough, I have never understood why the night dives in this part of Indonesia are

far from spectacular having seen the enormous biodiversity milling around the coral reef during the day. Is there a biologist around to enlighten us on this?

Although the timetable is flexible based on what the passengers want, and needless to say on the climate, which tends to be good the whole year round, there are usually three dives plus the night dive.

Oh, by the way, I forgot to mention that as the owners are Europeans, there are 15-litre stainless steel bottles on board, difficult to



A blackish Manta Ray exiting the clean station. Nikon D300, Subal housing, 2 Inon Z-240, strobes, 10mm, ISO200 1/80 F8

find on other similar cruises. These allow you to stay underwater for longer and mean that you don't have to carry the bothersome lead weights. And of course if you want Nitrox it's available, too.

As we did 35 dives I'm not going to go into all the detail, but I shall tell you about my favourites which I hope will be yours too.

The diving conditions in this area are quite different to other areas of this vast country as here, depending on the tides, there is less visibility due to the plankton

in the water and the strong currents which, in themselves, are the ideal conditions for a tremendous explosion of life. However, this is not a trip for beginners, certain skill is needed to cope with the currents, which can be treacherous like in the Galápagos or the Maldives.

The Passage: As its name suggests, it really is a passageway, like a river (of salt water) between two islands. On the left-hand side in a cove, there are large gorgonians and soft coral less than 6 metres from the surface. Totally unthinkable anywhere

else if it were not for the currents which feed these animals/plants and the fact that they have very little light in the shallows owing to the shoreline trees. If our fellow diver doesn't break the spell with his bubbles, on a day with the sea in a state of total calm we can see the reflection of the tops of the trees casting their shadows over us. In the mangrove swamps there lives a curious fish called the Archerfish; a nifty hunter of insects which he cleverly catches with his...spit. Well worth seeing.

When we've used up the memory card with our shots we can swim out to the middle of the "river" and literally let ourselves go with the flow. There's not much to be seen on the riverbed but shooting down the current feels like being on a roller-coaster. During our little "excursion" we were accompanied by a remora fish which came from nowhere and mistook me for a ray fish, a shark or god knows what...when the "river" reaches its end, the current slowly comes to a stop and the zodiacs "fish us out" and take us back to the "mother ship".

Airborek: The jetty of this island is probably one of the most photographed in the world. Its wooden columns have not only got sponges embedded in them but also soft coral bushes of vibrant colours. If you dive in with the sun directly above the



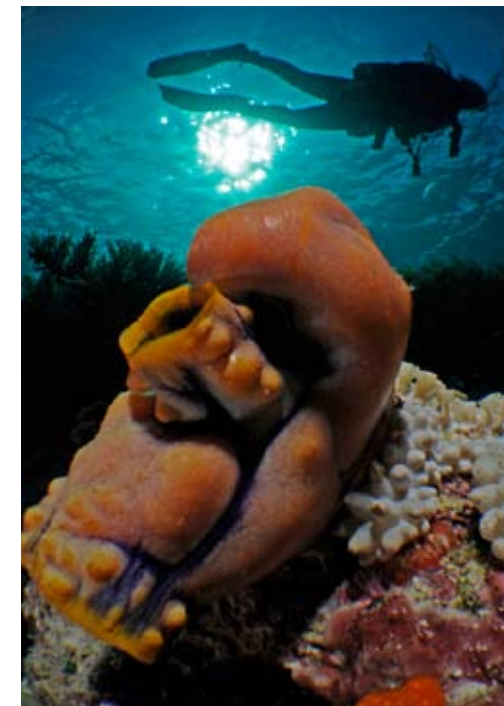
One of the holes in Goa Farundi. Nikon D300, Subal housing, 2 Inon Z-240, strobes, 12mm, ISO200 1/60 F13

jetty, you'll watch spellbound as the sun's rays pass through the battered planks and light up the pillars and the nets which are used to hold the catches for a short time.. These conditions of shallow water, plenty of light, relatively clean water, shapes, colours and light are a photographer's paradise...

Furthermore, under the shaded grid, a shoal of jack fish wanders by, giving some movement to the scene. And at the far end of the jetty there is usually a group of friendly batfish at

a cleaning station. Right next to them are several considerably large tridacna clams pouting their colourful lips. Not only this, but this construction is also the gateway to a very pretty village, and is well worth a visit to stretch your legs, chat to the friendly villagers and see its curious catholic church of which they are very proud.

Manta Mantra: Almost in single file, three coral pillars stand in the middle of the sand and form the invisible road which joins several cleaning stations for these graceful



One really close ascidian and a diver. Nikon D300, Subal housing, 2 Inon Z-240, strobes, 60 mm + Inon Semi Fish eye, ISO200 1/125 F32.

beings. It is important that the divers go down quietly and position themselves around the pillars although not too close to bother the rays during the parasite removal process, to watch their elegant but sometimes nervous movements while they are being cleaned. With a bit of luck we might even spot them queuing up to be de-wormed or perhaps see how one of these specimens repeatedly goes around the coral towers, trying to



My wife and model watching at a school of snappers. Nikon D300, Subal housing, Subtronic Nova + YS 120 strobes, 17mm, ISO200 1/80 F8

catch the attention of its small “flight crew”. Funnily enough, the ones that we saw were very dark, even their bellies, something I’ve only seen in Socorro (Mexico). After the dive, the biggest pillar is well worth visiting to see a shoal of glassfish just off to one side.

Pulau Wai: A pretty island surrounded by spectacular reefs where it is possible to get “fifty- fifty” type photographs and where a shore visit is highly recommended. A second-world war plane lays hidden deep

in these waters. A powerful 7-ton, bomber plane, one of the 15.700, P-47D Thunderbolt, built in the USA which still conserves some of its guns but, needless to say, they are totally covered in coral, sponges and alcyonarias.

At 30 metres deep we found the plane on a slope, lying on its back. It’s well worth taking a look at the wrecked cockpit and single powerful propeller.

Fiabecet: Not even in Fiji, quite rightly famous for having the biggest



The belly and head of a big wobegong flying over my head. Nikon D300, Subal housing, Subtronic Nova + YS 120 strobes, 17mm, ISO200 1/80 F16

and best kept gorgonians in the world, had we done a dive with such lavish examples swishing and swaying with the current; half a dozen different species, some of which, were bigger than a diver, all in perfect condition, one after another at different depths ranging from 12 to 50 metres. In and out of their branches, small fishes look for shelter, and in the blue, a couple of shy Napoleon Wrasse; shoals of smallish brightly coloured fishes, weaving through this winding forest of flexible arabesque. A Wobbegong

shark (a curious bearded shark) looms out of a bleak area which appeared to be nothing more than sand and shows us its incredible camouflage, going from a pale brown to a strong copper-colour. Barely swishing its tail from side to side, hardly moving the top of its body, it swims inconspicuously, looking for another place to lie in wait for its unsuspecting victims.

Raja Ampat which owes its name to 4 islands, the 4 Kings, is not only an underwater Paradise; the landscape which lies beyond the “blue frontier”



The Ondina at sunset.

hands, fish, deer, turtles... Neither their origin, nor their antiquity is clear, but there is no doubt that they are worth a visit, even if it's just to "lose yourself" in the tangled "seawater jungle" of the Raja Ampat islands.

These are the dives that you just cannot miss if you ever come to this remote part of Papua. From here onwards, we continue our voyage towards Ambon, but that is yet another story to come...

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enchants us with its outstanding beauty. Rocky formations, no doubt of volcanic origin, crammed with trees, plants and wild flowers all competing to colonise every nook and cranny. Owing to the erosion of the sea, the majority of the islets are shaped like mushrooms and some of the smaller ones – and sometimes the not so small ones, are on the verge of losing their precarious balance and crashing down nosily into the sea

One afternoon, with the sole help of a GPS and a few notes jotted down from the Internet, we set out on an unforgettable trip in search of a wall with cave paintings. We sped off on the two zodiacs leaving the Ondina behind, plying the peaceful waters which are found in these intricate labyrinths of islands. The waters are shallow and you have to be on the alert: after getting it wrong a few times in the many canals, we finally reached the wall where we photographed all sorts of shapes and forms, some almost indistinguishable:

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