

Diving the rich currents of Raja Ampat

Don Silcock

A beautiful black manta ray at Manta Mantra in the Dampier Strait

DIVING THE RICH CURRENTS OF RAJA AMPAT
Story & Photos: Don Silcock



result in a higher sea level to the north of the Indonesian archipelago.

This disparity produces a huge volume of water, rich in nutrients from the deep Pacific Ocean basins to the north, which flows through the archipelago to the Indian Ocean in the south.

The throughflow first touches land around Raja Ampat, and its prolific waters are effectively the lifeblood of the incredible reefs and marine ecosystems of the area.

But those waters are strong, incredibly strong... so strong in fact that two words of Bahasa Indonesian you will quickly learn are “arus kencang”.

You will hear them in the rapid interchange between the dive guides and the boat boys as they discuss the practicalities of safely immersing a group of “bules” (slang for foreigners) in the waters of Raja Ampat.

Arus kencang means strong current and the emphasis given to those two words will give you an instant insight into what awaits you below.

Diving in strong currents requires both confidence and an understanding of why the water velocity is so high. (See sidebar.)

It also needs first-class surface logistics to make sure that when you surface, the support boat is waiting for you – never forget, Raja Ampat is a remote area in a remote area!

There are three principal areas to dive in Raja Ampat – in and around the Dampier Strait that separates the main islands of Waigeo and Batanta, Waigeo itself and the area around the island of Misool in the south.

All three offer spectacular diving and underwater experiences that could fill a couple of books, but there are certain signature dives in each area that really should not be missed.

Dampier Strait

This is where most liveboards start and finish their diving programs because it is closest to the town of Sorong and its airport, currently the only point of entry to the Raja Ampat area.

For those familiar with fluid dynamics, the Dampier Strait can be thought of as a venturi, where a restriction in diameter automatically increases the velocity of the fluid passing through it.



Misool Eco Resort



Incredible scenery of the Misool area



A hairy ornate ghost pipefish at Happy Ending in Batanta

While Papua New Guinea, the eastern half of the largest tropical island in the world, has long been established as a diver's Mecca, the hot new location for divers is at the northwestern tip of the island's western half, in the Indonesian territory now generally known as West Papua. That location is Raja Ampat.

“...It has to be said that Raja Ampat is not for everybody and many divers who go there are simply not ready for the experience...”

Just 10 years ago your choices in this remote area were limited to one dive resort and a couple of liveboards, but now there are several well established resorts and up to 50 boats operating the Raja Ampat area at the peak of the diving season!

Raja Ampat means “four kings” in Bahasa Indonesia. The name comes



Underneath Airborek Jetty in the Dampier Strait

from the local myth of a woman who finds seven eggs – four (ampat) of which hatch and become kings (rajas) who occupy the area's biggest islands, while the other three become a ghost, a woman and a stone.

Those four big islands are Waigeo, Salawati, Batanta and Misool, and they are surrounded by about 1500 smaller islands and some 40,000sq.km of water. Surveys of the Raja Ampat area have identified more than 600 species of hard

coral – nearly 75% of the world's total – and more than 1700 species of reef fish, which is more than any other similarly-sized region on the planet.

This incredible biodiversity is due to the tremendous flow of water through the archipelago, which marine scientists call the Indonesian throughflow.

This natural phenomenon is created by the trade winds and oceanic currents of the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, which flow in opposite directions and



A reef manta ray is cleaned at Manta Mantra



A cruising reef manta ray at Manta Mantra

For all the rest of us, think really strong currents – because the strait is the principal channel through which the flow of water from the Pacific Ocean passes through on its way south. Those currents and the rich nutrients in the water have created some of the most spectacular reefs, bommies and encounters you are ever likely to experience.

Manta Mantra is a manta ray cleaning station on the southern side of the large reef that separates Mansuar Island, from the much smaller Airborek Island, at the western end of the Dampier Strait. The cleaning station is a number of small bommies in the channel between the main reef and a smaller one to the south. Strong currents run through the channel, which together

with the numerous cleaner wrasse and butterflyfish on the bommies, have created the perfect conditions for mantas to come in and be cleaned of their parasites.

“...Strong currents have created the perfect conditions for mantas to come in and be cleaned of their parasites...”

As many as 30 mantas have been reported on the site, but on the days I dived it we saw between five and 10 on every dive.

The site is very popular and a strict demarcation code is enforced to ensure the presence of so many divers does not drive away the mantas. A line of rocks has been laid out in about 16m of water, close enough to the bommies so divers can watch and photograph the mantas, but far enough away to allow them to be cleaned in relative peace.

The thing to do at Manta Mantra is get



yourself in position somewhere along the demarcation line where you can comfortably hold on against the currents and then wait...

The site is fairly shallow and so bottom time is not an issue and as the mantas complete their cleaning rituals they often come and check out the waiting divers with some upfront and personal interactions.

Another signature dive site not to be missed in the Strait are the two jetties on the small island of Airborek.

Here the currents flow around the jetties, creating a mini-ecosystem on the wooden structures, with rich growths of vibrant soft corals on the vertical piles and resident schools of jacks and batfish patrolling in between.

Late afternoon on a calm day produces a perfect setting for wide-angle photography as the sun's rays create stunning backdrops to the abundant subject matter under the jetty. Then, if you tire of that, the local kids make excellent models as they swim down to pose for the camera.

Waigeo

In the northern area of Raja Ampat, around the western tip of the island of Waigeo are several good dive spots such as the critter site Waterlogged and the nearby Pearl Farm jetty in Alyui Bay. But the narrow channel that separates the islands of Gam and Waigeo is very much



Schooling fish underneath Airborek Jetty



A diver explores one of Misool's beautiful reefs



A colourful, but wary goby...



Soft corals in The Passage

the signature dive in Waigeo. The channel's proper name is Kabui Passage and it connects the western side of Kabui Bay to the Halmahera Sea, but it is universally referred to as simply the Passage. Roughly one nautical mile long, the Passage is about 60m wide and is subject to some really strong currents that can make the journey through it feel a little bit like whitewater rafting! Although it looks just like a fast-flowing freshwater river making its way through dense jungle, it is actually seawater and in the many small inlets along the side of the Passage, mini ecosystems have been established.

“...the Passage is about 60m wide and is subject to some really strong currents that can make the journey through it feel a little bit like whitewater rafting!...”

These are quite special, particularly the ones on the southern side near Kabui Bay where large sea fans, soft corals

and illuminate the colourful growth below, creating a superb and mysterious effect. Then there are the mangroves, and archerfish hunting their prey in their unique “spit and stun” technique, as well as small schools of halfbeaks up in the inlets. But don't forget to look out into the Passage itself as you will often see passing sharks, turtles and jacks – what a dive!

Misool

Some 130km to the south of the Dampier Strait area and roughly halfway to Ceram in the Molluccas is the large island of Misool and what are probably the most rich and vibrant reefs in the world.

It is hard to imagine a more picturesque and inspiring area, both above and below the water!

But it is not like this by accident and much of the credit for the current excellent status of the area's reefs and marine habitats must go to the Misool Eco Resort for its pioneering conservation work. A superlative example of what can be done to arrest

and colourful sponges have grown in shallow waters under the overhanging jungle, creating quite unique photo opportunities. Diving the Passage around midday offers the chance to capture the sun's rays as they pierce the overhead canopy



A cuttlefish poses for the camera



Boo Windows in Misool

decline and convince local communities that the seas are not an inexhaustible resource to be plundered, the resort has really done a tremendous job and is to be applauded.

There are numerous tremendous sites in the string of islands to the southeast corner of Misool but Fiabachet is the jewel in the crown and a simply amazing experience.

In fact, I wonder if it is the best reef in the world. Hard to answer in a quantifiable manner but subjectively Fiabachet has to be in the top 10, if not the top five. It is simply that good! The actual site is a long underwater ridge that runs west to east and connects two rocky outcrops – Nudi Rock at the western end and Tank Rock at the eastern end.

The underwater area around Nudi Rock, which takes its name from the remarkable similarity its above water shape bears to a nudibranch, is positively stunning and probably the best and most dynamic part of Fiabachet.

The quality and quantity of the hard and soft corals, sponges, gorgonian fans, sea whips and general fish life will take your breath away.

But the area around Tank is superb as well and if you went there first you would probably think it can't get much better than this... only to journey down the ridge to Nudi and find yourself taken to the next level!

It's hard to pick the next best dive site after Fiabachet as there are so many to choose from but nearby Batu Boo is quite something too.

It's also known as Boo Windows because of the two large, shallow underwater holes in the main island that create excellent photo opportunities at certain times of the day when the sun streams through them.

The site is a large underwater seamount that runs north to south. At the northern end is a large oval-shaped rocky outcrop, while at the southern end there is a small outcrop with a single tree growing on it – which has been christened Batu Jamur, or mushroom rock, for obvious reasons. The two “windows” are at the southern end of the main rock and face west to east, making them perfect for the sun's rays!

Besides the windows there is a great



A diver admires soft corals at Fiabachet in Misool



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Sunset in Misool



Tube sponges in
The Passage

“...Fiabachet is the jewel in the crown... I wonder if it is the best reef in the world...”

there are no direct flights from the main international entry points into Indonesia – Jakarta and Bali – so you typically have to transit through Makassar in South Sulawesi, which can add another day to the journey. Should Raja Ampat be on your diving “bucket list”? Yes... but make sure you are ready for it is the best advice I can offer.

Don Silcock
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deal to see at Batu Boo, starting with the walls of the seamount that are richly covered in soft corals and gorgonian fans – many with pygmy seahorses.

In conclusion

I am often asked if I prefer Raja Ampat to PNG and the answer is no – I consider them both about equal. For sure there is some phenomenal diving around the Four Kings, but equally so there is tremendous diving in PNG and without the extreme currents you have to be able to deal with to enjoy Raja Ampat at its very best. There are also the logistics involved in actually getting to Sorong. Currently

**DIVING IN STRONG CURRENTS
Do's And Don'ts:**

The trick to diving in strong currents around Raja Ampat is to understand the basic mechanism and work with it, because you just can't fight it. Strong currents are the life force of vibrant reefs systems and they are at their strongest around the edges and at their most manageable in the centre. Picture a large submerged bommie or pinnacle that rises up from the deep and faces into the predominant current. Where that current hits the reef first is where its velocity is low and the deeper you go at that point, the less that velocity will be. But as the current goes around the sides, the velocity increases dramatically and where it goes over the top of the bommie or pinnacle, particularly if it is shallow, the velocity is at its maximum. So when you enter the water it should be upcurrent from the bommie and you must get down on the front as quickly as you can, which is the sweet spot where the current is manageable and where the most prolific fish activity is. Miss the front and you will think you are in a washing machine as the current sweeps you around or over the top.



Village children
happy to pose
for the camera at
Aireborek Jetty

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