

profile

Max Ammer is the founder of Papua Diving Resorts, including the Sorido Bay Resort (in front) and Kri Eco Resort (at right), located on Kri Island in Raja Ampat, Indonesia.

Text by Don Silcock
Photos courtesy of Max Ammer and Don Silcock

Unveiling Max Ammer's extraordinary journey—from pioneering Raja Ampat as a world-class diving site to his relentless dedication towards uplifting local communities and championing environmental conservation—Don Silcock has the story.

It really is quite incredible that in just over 20 years, Raja Ampat has gone from a little-known, remote outpost of the huge Indonesian archipelago to



Max Ammer

Pioneer of Diving in Raja Ampat & Conservation Champion

DON SILCOCK



COURTESY OF MAX AMMER

Max Ammer flying a Super Drifter ultralight floatplane

one of the must-do diving locations globally. Google “Raja Ampat diving” and you will be bombarded with dozens of options, ranging across the full spectrum of live-aboard vessels—huge and luxurious, spa-suite behemoths—to the floating equivalent of backpacker hostels. In addition, on land, the options range from beautiful resorts to village homestays, with everything in-between!

The huge wave of tourism that has washed over Raja Ampat changed many things for the better; the main town of Sorong now has a new airport, several well-stocked supermarkets, and numerous good

hotels. Whereas back in the late ‘90s and early ‘00s, it was quite different with the old airport feeling like something out of the 1950s (because it was), very limited shopping options and basic accommodation.

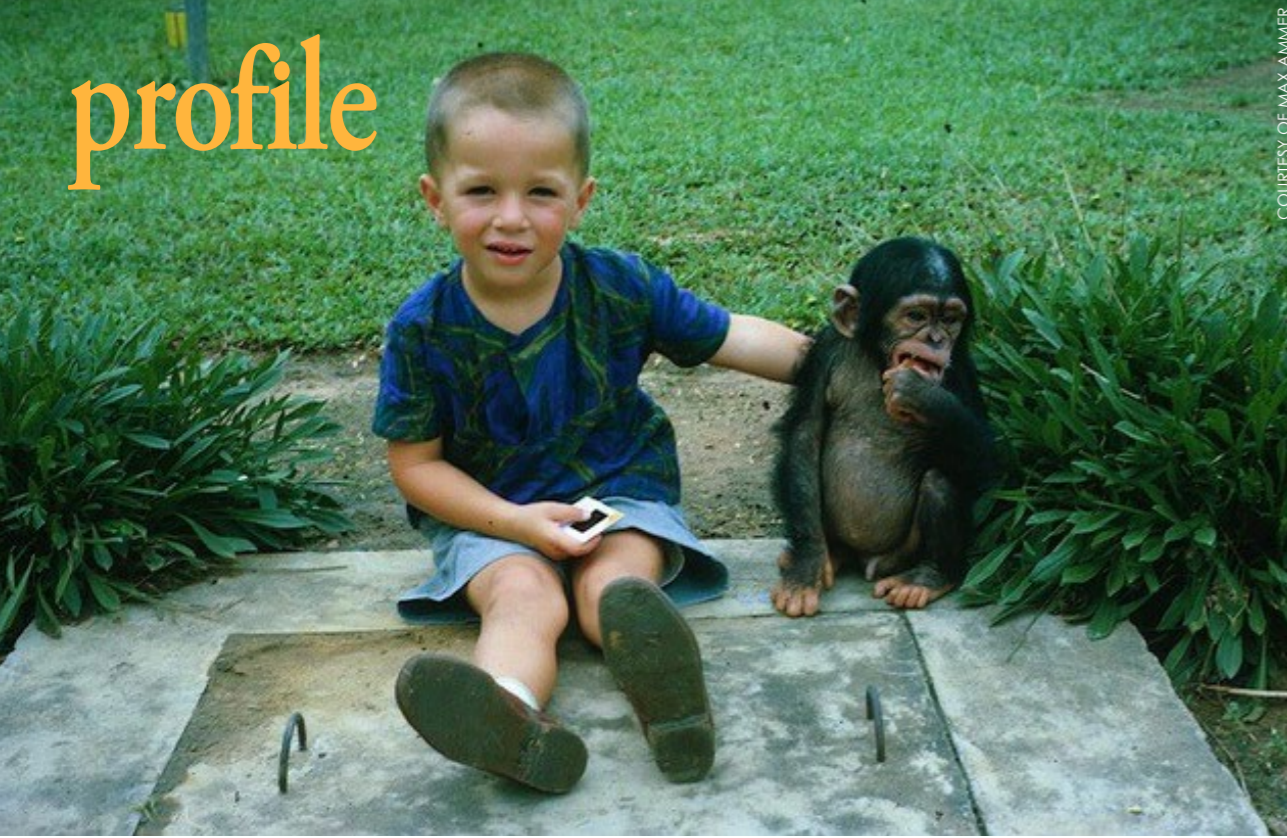
Choices for diving in Raja Ampat were also very limited with the only land-based option a beach camp on the island of Kri, at the western end of the Dampier Strait, some two to three hours’ journey by small boat from Sorong! It was when I was first looking into that beach camp that I heard of Max Ammer—one of the handful of adventurous and entrepreneurial “bules”

(foreigners) who have made Indonesia their home and helped make Raja Ampat the global diving location it is today.

Max is always busy, but he carved out some time for me in late 2022 for a phone interview to talk about his life and adventures in Raja Ampat. Then, in April 2023, I returned to Raja Ampat and visited Max at his Sorido Bay resort on Cape Kri to complete the interview.

I spent many fascinating hours chatting with him about his life, adventures and the inevitable ups and downs of a life literally lived to the full.





COURTESY OF MAX AMMER

Max Ammer as a child in Nigeria (above); Rich biodiversity on Raja Ampat reef (right)

Early days

Psychologists tell us that our early years have a profound impact on the direction our lives take. So, I was interested in Max's early days and his first 14 years spent in Nigeria where his father worked in the country's oil

and gas industry. It was a period in his life about which he spoke with deep warmth—describing his family's expat villa as nearly an open zoo for the animals that lived in the large tropical gardens.

Elements of Africa clearly seeped into his DNA during those formative years because when the family returned to their home in Holland, he felt that the country was too small and highly regulated—almost the polar opposite of Nigeria.

It was back in Europe as a teenager that Max developed his enduring passion for WWII Harley Davidson motorcycles. At just 17, he bought a Harley Davidson WLA and set about returning it to its former glory and ultimately beginning his first career restoring other vintage Harleys for their owners.

Discovering Indonesia

While looking for suitable premises to base that small business, he met the person who would introduce him to Indonesia. The owner of the building was a WWII veteran who had



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witnessed the dumping of US Army Willys jeeps on the remote island of Morotai in the northern end of Halmahera province.

The Army's contract with Willys stipulated that none of their jeeps could be brought back to the United States at the end of WWII, so there was no choice but to dump some 100-plus brand-new jeeps on the edge of Morotai's jungle. Max was intrigued and sensed a business opportunity, so he went to Morotai to try and find those jeeps.

That was in 1989, when Max was just 28, and decades before the internet opened the world. Just getting to Morotai by Indonesian ferry was an adventure in itself, but finding the

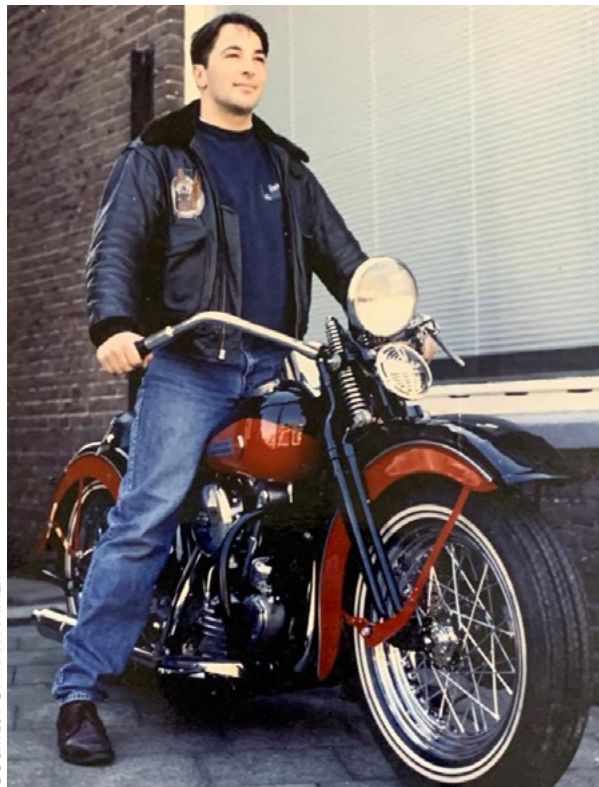
jeeps, salvaging key components, and then selling them to collectors around the world bring thoughts of "Indiana Jones" to mind! He did not know it at the time, but Max had found a new home and now says there were many things about Indonesia that reminded him of those early years in Nigeria.

Discovering Raja Ampat

While he was in Morotai, Max heard stories about American WWII aircraft wrecks in Raja Ampat and made his way there by ferry. It turned out that many of them were underwater, so he set about getting the necessary equipment to be able to find and then dive them.

To put that in perspective, at that point in time, very few people were diving in Indonesia, and nobody was diving in Raja Ampat—so there were no tanks, compressors, or anybody to help. Finding the wrecks required a lot of solo diving in the strong currents of the Dampier Strait, and he was completely dependent on the support of the local Papuans who were helping him. While they had no understanding whatsoever of what was under the water, they knew those currents like the backs of their hands, which helped keep Max safe.

Although he was searching for aircraft wrecks, what Max discovered underwater in Raja Ampat is what we now know as probably the best tropi-



COURTESY OF MAX AMMER

Max, as a teenager, with his motorcycle





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Sorido Bay's jetty at sunrise (above);
The lounge at Sorido Bay (right)

cal diving in the world. And it was during that discovery that he developed his strong affection for the local Papuans—the people of West Papua.

Papuans are predominantly of Melanesian (Oceania) extraction and are known for their diverse cultures, languages and distinctive physical features. Max found them to be friendly and helpful, but almost like second-class citizens in their own land because of the Javanese-centric way the Republic of Indonesia works.

Eco-dive camps

Max's experience in Raja Ampat convinced him to do two key things: start a business that would provide him with a source of income, and therefore, a way to help Papuans live better lives. Tourism seemed to offer the best and quickest way forward as Raja Ampat was an incredibly scenic location, and he had seen what was under the water, but how to start when there was simply no infrastructure?

His solution was a beach "eco-camp" on the island of Kri, offering



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adventurous travellers the opportunity for exceptional diving in a beautiful but truly off-the-grid location. He took the idea to Yenbuba village and got permission to run the camps on the site that would later become his Eco Resort on the northern coast.

The next step was to get the first customers, and so he placed an advertisement for the adventure in a Dutch newspaper and sure enough, got some takers, which meant that he had to take a loan of US\$100,000 from his father to make it all happen. It turned out Max was right, and soon he had bookings two years in advance from Europeans and Americans wanting a taste of Raja Ampat adventure. From those very humble beginnings, Max

Max Ammer (second from left) meeting with the locals (below).



COURTESY OF MAX AMMER



COURTESY OF MAX AMMER

Max Ammer with a local friend (above);
A young Max Ammer (holding the paddle)
with some of his first guests (lower left)

has grown his dive-tourism business by taking a two-prong approach with the Eco Resort catering to the lower end of the market and his bespoke Sorido Bay Resort on Cape Kri itself.

Enabling the Papuans

Establishing a successful dive business in Raja Ampat has allowed Max to pursue his desire to improve the lives of the Papuan people, and I was keen to understand what that meant. The world's second largest island, New Guinea was so-named by the first European explorers because the features of the indigenous people were very similar to those of the people of the West African region of Guinea.

It is truly an incredible part of the world with amazing topography, geography, cultures and biodiversity. Its eastern half is now the independent country of Papua New Guinea and the western half is the Indonesian province of West Papua.

Most Papuans live traditional subsistence and hunter-gatherer lifestyles, where the land and/or the sea provide enough to eat and trade. But outside the larger towns, access to good schools and teachers is practically and logistically difficult at best. Upward mobility and hopes of a better life were almost impossible as the whole province was largely ignored by the Indonesian government—unless they got restive.

Max Ammer



COURTESY OF MAX AMMER

What Max has tried to do, initially through dive tourism and then with his other ventures, is create opportunities for Papuans to work, earn money and progress up Maslow's hierarchy. Basically, that boils down to helping them acquire skills and employing them at the resorts, where 90 percent of the staff are Papuan. But as time progressed, this initiative expanded into the making of all the furniture for the resorts and then the building of boats used for both diving and transport.

One of those other ventures is Frontier Aviation—a volunteer-based, nonprofit organisation dedicated to training Papuans to build, maintain and fly multiple types of aircraft. Max was particularly proud that the first fully-fledged local pilot, Noor Hilapok, had graduated recently.

And, to try and improve access to good education in Raja Ampat, through his Raja Ampat Research and Conservation Center (RARCC) foundation, Max has been supporting a school in the remote village of Yarweser, on the large island of Batanta, since 2018. "Support" means getting teachers properly trained to teach as well as providing teach-



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Frontier Aviation (above); Noor Hilapok (second from right) became a captain and did his first solo flight in Papua, with Frontier Aviation (right)

ing materials and books, new school buildings and accommodation for the teacher.

Conservation

Max is what I would describe as a pragmatic conservationist. Having seen Raja Ampat's reefs and stunning biodiversity long before anybody else, he knows, shall we say, what "good" really looks like. And having pioneered land-based dive tourism, using small boats with outboard engines, he knows the damage leaked two-stroke oil can do, now that the number of those boats in daily use has mushroomed. He has also seen the number of liveaboards in Raja Ampat skyrocket and worries about what unmonitored raw sewage dis-

charges will do to those reefs.

His approach is to actively support initiatives to quantify such issues and then put in place measures to reduce the impact. Max gave me a guided tour of the Sorido Bay Resort and showed me the rainwater collection systems that provide all the freshwater. Then there are the wastewater gardens, the recycling system that sends all rubbish back to Sorong for proper disposal, and the boatbuilding that will use much more environmentally-friendly inboard-powered cat-

amarans to replace the current outboard-powered boats.

Max also works closely with Mark Erdmann, the Asia-Pacific VP of Conservation International (CI), and supports CI's programmes and initiatives in West Papua, which have been very effective in raising overall awareness of just how special the area is. CI has been particularly effective in helping the Indonesian government to improve the conservation and management of sharks and rays.

Max Ammer with one of his Bell P47 helicopters (above); Super Drifter ultralight floatplane on the beach (top right); Yarweser school pupils with their teacher (right)

Expeditions

One final and very impressive thing I learnt about Max is his exploration of remote and isolated areas of West Papua, including leading expeditions for acclaimed author and ULCA Professor of Geography Jared Diamond. Much of that exploration was done using the two-seat, Rotax engine-powered Super Drifter ultralight floatplane, with the longest flight accomplished being from Misool to Arguni Bay near Fakfak—a journey that took 7.5 hours of flight time.

A life lived to the full (or should that be the "Max"?)

I have been interested in learning more about Max since I first heard about those beach camps on Kri and talking to him on the phone was really intriguing. But sitting down with him and chatting numerous times at

Sorido Bay was "next level."

The guy has done so much that, at times, it really becomes difficult to absorb it all, and I would have to tell him, "Max, I am getting dizzy." He is into so many things and is very passionate about them all but remains very humble and matter-of-fact. There is no braggadocio... None!

What he has done and continues to do is simply incredible. In many ways, it seems to me

that if Max had never existed, Raja Ampat would have had to invent him. □

Don Silcock is an Australian underwater photographer based in Bali, Indonesia. Find extensive location guides, articles and images of some of the best diving locations in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as "big animal" experiences globally, on his website at: indopacificimages.com.

