



*Indonesia's*  
**Raja Ampat**  
*The Four Kings*

Text and photos by Steve Jones



Close encounter with a manta at Blue Magic, one of many premier dive spots in the Dampier Strait

**Swirling unicorn fish surround me and seem to have accepted me as one of their own. I can no longer see the surface nor anything else, save for a wall of fish. Only four minutes into the dive and it's already evident that this site is living up to its reputation, literally boiling with fish. Moments like this remind me why I dive.**

All too quickly the fish blanket parts and the moment ends. Pressing on into

the current I'm distracted by a huge school of jacks tempting me to abandon my plan. I resist, reminding myself that something greater may await. I pass a wobbegong posing perfectly under an overhang filled with colorful soft corals. I rudely ignore it.

At last, I reach the end of the reef, alone, and stare into the blue while I calm my breathing down. As the minutes pass, doubt creeps into my mind as to whether I've made the right decision. Everyone is enjoying the busy reef behind me and I am missing it all! As I am about to give up, I glance a dark shadow before me in the blue, growing larger every second. I swim out from

the reef and am greeted by the largest manta ray I have ever seen. Welcome to Blue Magic, a dive site that typifies the wonders to be found in Dampier Strait, one of the hotspots in Raja Ampat.

**Diversity!**

Over the past ten years or so, Raja Ampat has often been described as having some of the best diving to be found anywhere, but what makes this area so special? From my perspective, it can be summed up in one word: Diversity! It is prevalent here, not only in the habitats to be found, which in turn support the myriad of species, but also

Schooling jacks at Blue Magic in the Dampier Strait (above); Crinoids and soft coral at Four Kings, Wayilbatan Island (top right). PREVIOUS PAGE: Four Kings dive site in the Misool area is typical of the stunning reefs to be found in the south of Raja Ampat

# Raja Ampat

## WHAT'S IN A NAME

The name *Raja Ampat* (Malay for *Four Kings*) is derived from the four largest islands that make up this archipelago: Salawati, Misool, Batanta and Waigeo. These accompany over 1,500 smaller islands and islets found on the northwestern tip of the province of West Papua, which itself forms part of Indonesia's tenure of the west half of New Guinea, the second largest island in the world after Greenland. The eastern half of the island forms the mainland of the separate country of Papua New Guinea. ■



Red sea whips in the Fam Islands, which lie to the west of the Dampier Strait (left); Pair of scorpionfish at Cape Kri, in the Dampier Strait (right)

in the type of diving that can be experienced.

Those who enjoy stunning fish-packed seascapes that explode with colour will struggle to find a better location anywhere on the planet. Thrill seekers can enjoy high octane drift dives in those same currents that bring in manta rays. Those that enjoy the smaller things in life, the critters, will find themselves in the most biodiverse area of the world. Indeed, there are no less than 42 species of mantis shrimp in the area!

### By land or by sea?

There are two ways to experience Raja Ampat. If you wish to concentrate on a specific area with a more laid back approach, then a resort will be a good choice. However, if you want to sample the full variety of seascapes here, then a liveaboard is the only way to sample what this huge 50,000 sq km area has to offer.

Around 40 vessels currently operate here, yet given the size of the Raja Ampat, you will generally encounter

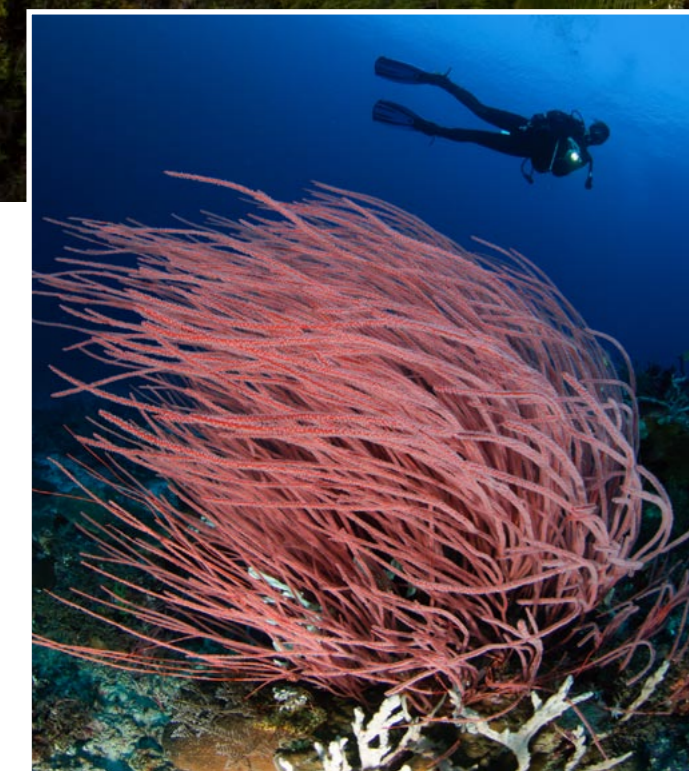
only a handful of other boats during your whole trip. Vessels also generally co-operate and avoid diving the same site at the same time as another boat, so your group will always have the reef to yourselves.

### North or south?

Shorter liveaboard itineraries will generally follow either a northern route taking in the reefs of the islands around Waigeo, or head south to Misool. Itineraries approaching two weeks will allow the

north and south to be sampled. These areas offer very different diving, so if you have the chance, make sure you visit both. Many cruise directors choose to round off the trips with dives in the current washed, spectacular reefs of the Dampier Strait.

Incidentally, current is an ever



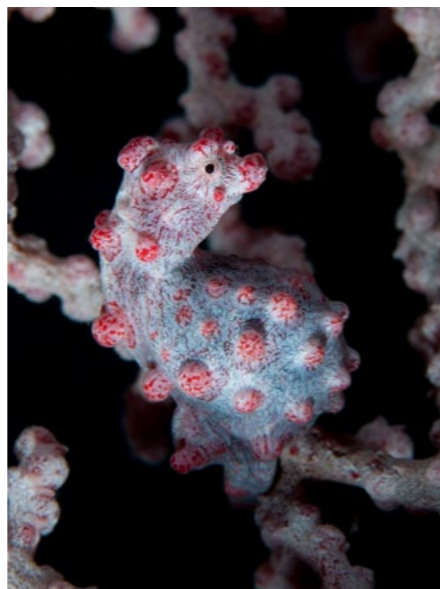


Stunning soft coral growth at Neptune Fan Sea, a channel full of sea fans in the south Raja Ampat

present feature of the dives in the region and of course, this is what makes the reefs so healthy. The common saying here is "no current, no life". However, with good timing and the right choice of site, you'll be able to see the reefs when they are at their best—that is



Pygmy cuttlefish in Anjui Bay—a haven for many critters



Pygmy seahorse on sea fans in Anjui Bay; Hawksbill turtle cruising the Farondi Islands, near Misool (lower right)

when there is a mild current, enough to concentrate all the fish upstream, but not so strong that you are swept away from the "sweet spot"—the point where the current splits around the reef and where the most dense fish life will be found.

**The northern areas**

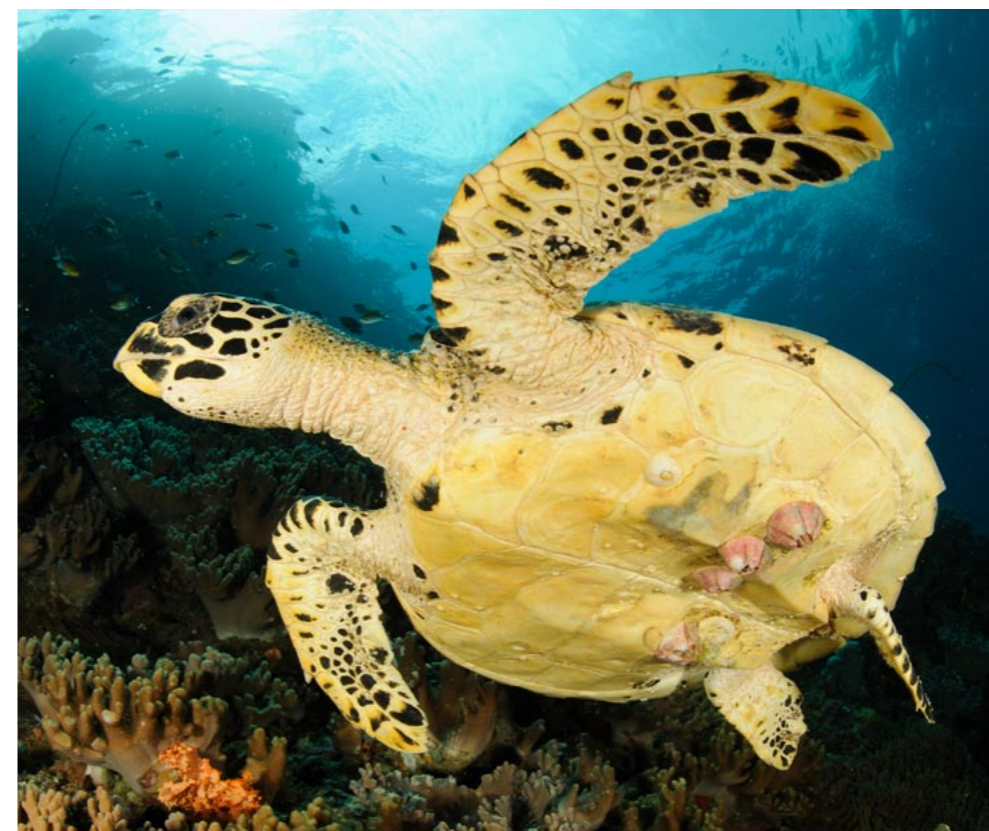
Northern itineraries will often head towards the spectacular limestone lagoon of Wayag—without doubt the most photographed topside location in Raja Ampat. A 30-minute hike up the steep limestone cliffs will allow a spectacular view of this stunning lagoon and provide great photographic opportunities.

Wayag and the surrounding islands are part of the Kawe Marine Protected Area (MPA) and the local village clans that steward these reefs have adopted a traditional approach, known as "Sasi" where no-take zones are seasonally rotated, allowing marine life stocks to



**Raja Ampat**

Limestone islands of Wayag



recover between harvests. These traditional and effective stewardship techniques are ones that many western fisheries have been unable or unwilling to adopt. Furthermore, on the nearby island of Piai, a guarded turtle rookery is helping the local populations of green and hawksbill turtle to

recover—all good indicators that conservation efforts in Raja Ampat are able to turn words into actions.

One of the most stunning dives in this northern region is Magic Rock. Head to the north west side and you will find a large archway that leads into a hollowed out

**THE GLOBAL EPICENTER OF MARINE BIODIVERSITY**  
 Raja Ampat lies at the tip of a densely forested peninsula that juts out from mainland West Papua. The region is known as the Bird's Head Seascape and runs from Triton Bay in the south, encompasses Raja Ampat and rounds the northwestern tip of West Papua, deep into Cenderawasih Bay. Located at the convergence of tectonic plates, millions of years of geological upheaval have carved out diverse habitats—quiet sandy bays, undersea mounts, drop-offs, mangroves, fast-flowing channels, the list goes on, and these habitats, fuelled by nutrient-rich upwellings from deep water in turn support the incredible variety of marine species to be found in this area. Over 600 hard coral species and over 1,700 reef fish species have so far been documented in the Bird's Head area, which is more than in any other region of this size on Earth. This is the Global Epicentre of Marine Biodiversity. ■

COUNTER-CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Giant manta ray at Blue Magic, Dampier Strait; Wreckage of a World War II P47 Thunderbolt at Wai Island; Wobbegong shelters under an overhang at Blue Magic; Sweetlips found at a bommie in deep water at Cape Kri



chamber. The floor here is filled with life and provides shelter from the current, allowing you to watch the masses of fish that gather just outside the archway.

Eagle Rock is another dive that typifies the northern Raja Ampat experience. This site is good for spotting manta rays, dogtooth tuna and humphead parrotfish. Large boulders that have broken off and rolled down to deeper water are alight with a dazzling array of orange

Dendronephthya soft corals. As you make your way back up the slope towards your safety stop, be sure to check under the many



overhangs, and you may be lucky to find a wobbegong.

### Tranquil waters

A common overnight anchorage in the north is in the sheltered Aljui Bay which lies on the western side of Waigeo, the largest of the main

four Raja Ampat islands. The steep vegetation covered walls provide good shelter. However, this area is also an excellent location for critter spotting, so liveaboards will often spend a day here.



Wire coral shrimp found on the slopes of Anjui Bay

## Raja Ampat

**CENTER OF THE CORAL TRIANGLE**  
It was not until 2001 that the area's importance was fully realized when Conservation International sent an expedition to the region following lobbying by renowned ichthyologist Gerry Allen. This area lies at the center of the "coral triangle", the region noted for its supremely high marine biodiversity that covers the intersection between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and spans the rest of Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Timor-Leste and the Solomon Islands. Leading scientist Dr Mark Erdmann has described this area as a "species factory" for the rest of the Coral Triangle. The majority of fish species found throughout the Coral Triangle are present in the Bird's Head Seascape. ■



The nutrient-rich waters in the bay host one of the region's largest pearl farms, the pier and fuel dock making for great night dives.

Here, you'll see barchin scorpionfish, cockatoo waspfish and Berry's bobtail squid amongst a myriad of other species.



Mayhem is a stunning dive in west Waigeo; *Chromodoris annae* nudibranch grazing in Anjui Bay (below)

this area, after diver David Shem-Tov luckily survived an attack by a saltwater crocodile in 2009.

Even sightings of "salties" are rare since their numbers



have been put under huge strain by human expansion into their territories, and they are quite rightly now protected in some regions. Nobody with a true love of the natural world would want a predator exterminated to make it safer for visitors, so the live-boards have taken the pragmatic approach of now avoiding this

area.

Actually the majority of great diving around Misool is to be found in the reefs off the south-east of the island. Here, you will find sites such as Boo's famous Window Wall, an image of which adorns the cover of Burt Jones and Maurine Shimlock's, *Diving Raja Ampat*, which was the



White arrow is another splendid critter dive where the undersea terrain slopes steeply to 30 metres and beyond. Amongst the soft corals and sea fans you'll find yellow examples of the pygmy seahorse (*H. bargibanti*), ornate ghostpipefish and the unusual solar-powered nudibranch, which contains algae in its skin that helps feed the host nudi through photosynthesis.

**The journey to the south**

The journey to the south and Misool involves covering a fair distance, but on the way down there are some incredible dive sites around Gam island, which lies to the south-west of Waigeo. On the aptly named "Mayhem" I encountered some of the most dense and diverse fish schooling I have ever seen on a single dive; I struggled to count the species

before me. Fusiliers swarmed over the reef, intermingling with unicornfish, surgeonfish, snappers and batfish whilst Spanish mackerels, huge trevallies and tunas glided through the schools waiting for opportunities to feed.

From Gam, it is an overnight run down south. Well-known images from this region, of soft corals with a backdrop of mangrove, were taken in the Nampale blue water mangroves off the north west of Misool. However, most live-boards now avoid



Sweeper at Blue Magic, Dampier Strait; Crinoid and soft coral growth in the Misool Region (right)





definitive dive guide to the region, now superseded by an expanded version that covers the entire Bird's Head Seascape.

## Exceptional reefs

The region is protected by the South East Misool Marine Protected Area, which administers most of the region's best dive sites (at least those that have so far been discovered—new dive sites are being found in Raja Ampat regularly and exploration is encouraged). Far out

east, the less visited reefs around Daram Island are wonderful with Andiamo regarded as one of the finest. This reef consists of a submerged pinnacle in front of two small islets. It was here that whilst I was diving amongst profuse sea fan growth on the north side, awash with fusiliers, that a juvenile



COUNTER-CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Snappers grace the stunning reef that leads to Boo Windows; View towards Boo Windows near Misool; Juvenile spadefish under Arborek jetty in the Dampier Strait—the jetty is a stunning dive and no deeper than 5m; Exploring a cavern in the Farondi Island, near Misool

whale shark casually cruised by in the blue, unbothered by our presence.

Moving back towards Misool, there are dive sites that may well cause you to rethink your definition of a good dive. At No Contest, we descended down a near vertical coral-covered wall and were barely able to hold position with a mod-



## TOURIST DESTINATION

Raja Ampat's growth as a tourist destination has only recently begun to accelerate, with marine tourism forming one of the strategic initiatives of the conservation programmes working to conserve the Bird's Head Seascape's unique heritage. Visitors to the area pay a park entrance fee of Rp.1 million (approximately US\$102), which is valid for a year. The money is split between conservation, community and tourism development programmes.

Even today, whilst Raja Ampat is possibly no longer true "frontier" diving, it is far removed from the popular resort destinations found in other parts of the world. As of 2013, there are seven resorts but the majority of operators use liveaboards, generally Pinisi sailing boats built in the traditional Indonesian way.

With West Papua being Indonesia's poorest province, there are many challenges for diving operators to overcome. Veteran operator Txus Reiriz has been operating the liveboard *MSY Seahorse* in the region for over eight years. "I heard about how good the diving was in Raja Ampat," said Txus, "but when I visited, I found it exceeded way beyond my already high expectations. The reefs, landscape and biodiversity are stunning, and even now, after over eight years operating in this area, we keep finding new dive sites on almost every trip. But the biggest challenge is it's a long journey for the guests to get here, and because of the remoteness, it's even harder for us to get the supplies we need. Logistics are hell, but it's completely worth it!" ■

erate current washing against the reef.

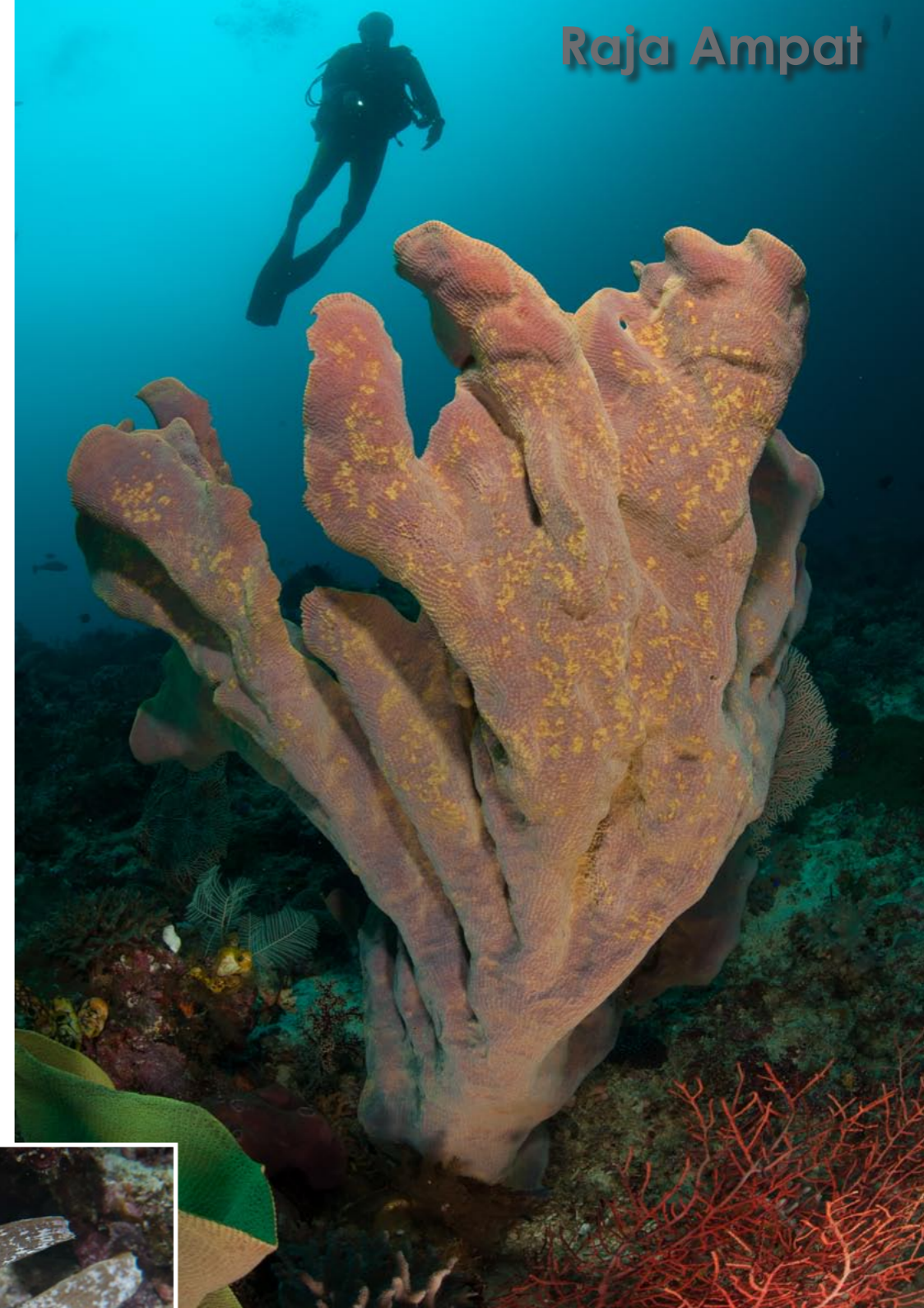
We were truly in the sweet spot—large schools of longfin spadefish were silhouetted against a scene of absolute chaos as thousands of fusiliers danced in the planktonic waters and two species of



Surprise encounter with a large pelagic manta at Blue Magic; Elephants ear sponge at Blue Magic, Dampier Strait (right); Soldierfish at Mioskon, Dampier Strait (lower left)

life—here also are some of the most exhilarating dives in West Papua.

Mike's Point, named after the son of Raja Ampat diving pioneer Max Ammer, has some of the best fish action in the area. The island above this reef (Kerupiar Island) was repeatedly bombed in World War II, since the U.S. Air Force thought it to be a camouflaged Japanese ship.



barracuda competed with baramundi cod for our attention. On the reef wall itself not a single centimetre was devoid of coral growth, with sea fans competing with *Dendronephthya* soft corals for a space on a reef that exploded with colour. Our ascent had to be done with care, as a downwash runs over the top of this thin long reef. To cap it all off, a sea snake accompanied me to the reef top.

There are currently over 25 described dive sites in this south east region of Misool, and that number is ever increasing. Leaving these behind and heading back north caused mixed emotions since the reefs here are so endearing, but I needn't have worried. The final chapter of our itinerary is the zenith of Raja

Ampat's high octane diving—The Dampier Strait.

**The Dampier Strait**

Baring the name of the British explorer William Dampier, this huge channel runs between Waigeo and Batanta, two of the four kings, and is not to be confused with the similarly named body of water in Papua New Guinea. Here, you'll find very strong currents, which is one of the reasons cruise directors leave this place until last, once the divers have settled in. However, it is these currents that bring the reefs to

When you see the wake coming off the island when the tide is running, it's easy to understand why.

Down in deeper water, there are large gulleys where a resident school of hump-



Mantas are not the only species to be found at Manta Sandy. These robust ghostpipefish were found amongst the coral

head parrotfish can often be sighted. However, it is on the up-current side where you will find the fish action, and here you can often find large schools of sweetlips with fusilier

and unicorn fish schools so dense they will often obscure the surface.

The strong nutrient-rich currents that run through the Strait also attract another visitor—manta rays. Manta Sandy and Manta Ridge are two sites where mantas can be reliably seen, provid-







CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Soft coral growth near Wayilbatan Island, Misool region; Giant barrel sponge at Four Kings, Misool Region; Exploring the caverns of Goa Farondi, Misool Region; Elephants ear sponge growing on the slopes of Blue Magic, Dampier Strait



is also here that you have a very good chance of encountering a reef shark.

One of the striking things about Raja Ampat's reefs in general is the absence of sharks. This whole region has in the past been heavily overfished by shark finners, and anyone who denies that shark overfishing is a problem should visit here and see if their views still reconcile with the visual evidence (or rather lack of it). Yet, shark numbers are now actually starting to climb back from the brink in Raja Ampat, with shark sightings increasing across the whole region. This has been helped by the conservation initiatives, and in December 2012, the area became legally protected as a shark and ray sanctuary, giving hope that one day the master of

ed there is a little current present. Although it should be said that you also have a chance of manta encounters at many other sites in Raja Ampat.

Manta Sandy has a small rubble wall that indicates the boundary that divers should not cross, to ensure they do not disturb mantas when they are at the cleaning station. Wait low on the sand bottom, and you may be blessed with a close encounter with one of the black mantas that frequent this site, complete with yellow

pilot fish dancing around their mouths.

Cape Kri rivals Mike's Point in terms of sheer fish density. You normally begin your dive on the west side and keep heading east on this sloping reef on the south of Kri island. As you approach the easterly point, the big fish action builds to a crescendo above the reef, with large snapper, emperor and barracuda hovering in the current whilst large trevally speed around picking off unfortunate fusiliers from the large schools. It



the seas will once again patrol the beautiful seascapes of Raja Ampat.

### Getting there

To dive Raja Ampat, you need to get to Sorong in West Papua. Makassar Airport on Sulawesi has direct flights to Sorong, and Makassar connects with Singapore, Jakarta and Manado. ■

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during the author's various visits to the region. For more information, visit: **Millionfish.com**

REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READING:  
B. JONES AND M. SHIMLOCK, *DIVING INDONESIA'S BIRD'S HEAD SEASCAPE*