

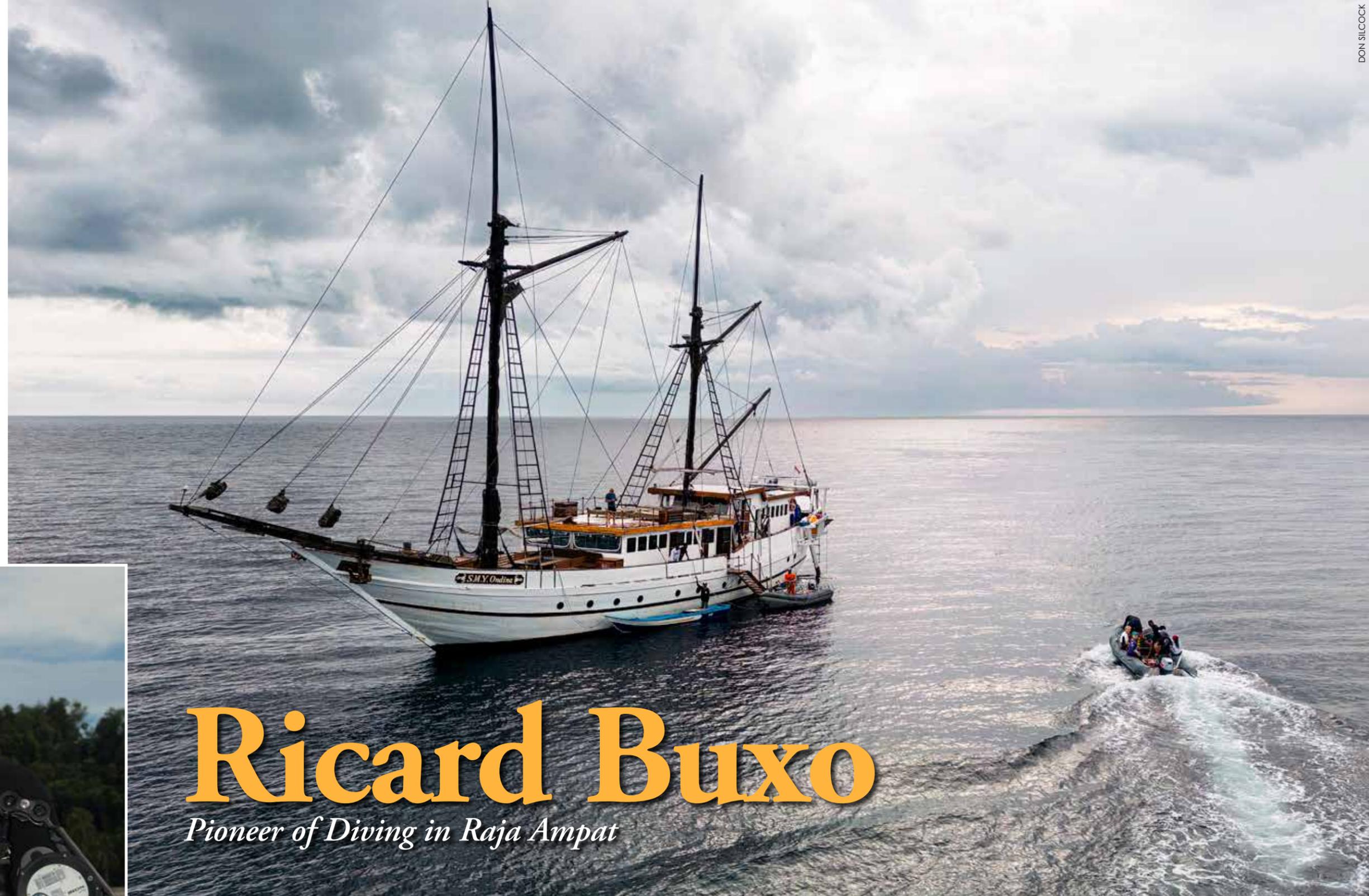
Text by Don Silcock
Photos courtesy of Don Silcock
and Ricard Buxo

Undeniably one of the world's extraordinary destinations, Raja Ampat blends breath-taking, above-water landscapes with a staggering abundance of marine biodiversity, into a remarkable combination that draws divers from all corners of the globe. Don Silcock writes about one of the pioneers of diving in this region, Ricard Buxo.



COURTESY OF RICARD BUJO

Ricard Buxo



Ricard Buxo

Pioneer of Diving in Raja Ampat

My introduction to this incredible region traces back to 1999 when I stumbled upon a post on an online underwater photography bulletin board (anybody remember them?). The author of which was trying to assemble a group of like-minded divers for a trip to a newly established “eco beach camp” on Kri Island—providing an opportunity to explore

the recently discovered dive sites in the Dampier Strait.

At that point, Raja Ampat was an unknown quantity to me, but the remoteness of the location and the descriptions of the dive sites ignited my curiosity. It promised what seemed to be an epic adventure, albeit with limited logistical details and formidable costs.

What truly gave me pause, however, was the realization that the journey from Sydney to Raja Ampat would take three days each way. My chance came six years later when the same person let me know she had found a new liveaboard that could take divers around all the key areas of Raja Ampat. And, by then, it only took two days each way. I



COURTESY OF RICARD BUXO

Enrique Rubio and Ricard Buxo in Tanah Beru, during the construction of the *Ondina*

decided to go... which is how I came to make my first trip on the SMY *Ondina* and meet Ricard Buxo!

Background

At that moment in time, Ricard had been residing in Indonesia for more than five years, fully immersed in the adventure of a lifetime, and it was unmistakably evident. Back then, my experience with the country was limited to some business trips to the capital of Jakarta, together with a couple of dive trips to Bali and Komodo. But essentially, I was oblivious to the vast expanse of Indonesia's 16,000+ islands.

In stark contrast, Ricard had a deep understanding of the country, its diverse people, and their rich cultures, which he graciously shared on that first trip and, moreover, he showed me how to dive in the strong currents that are the lifeblood of the archipelago. I had

no way of knowing, but that voyage aboard the *Ondina* in Raja Ampat was the start of my enduring fascination with the enigmatic wonder that is Indonesia.

Mutual friends

The catalyst for Ricard's Indonesian adventure was a meeting in Barcelona with fellow Spaniard Enrique Rubio—brokered by a mutual friend who knew what they were both



COURTESY OF RICARD BUXO

A young Ricard Buxo



The underwater realm of Raja Ampat is rich in biodiversity and beautiful reefs.

looking for. For Ricard, that was a new and exhilarating chapter after five years of working on liveaboards in the Egyptian Red Sea, while Enrique was on a quest to find the ideal individual to transform his vision for a business in Indonesia into a tangible reality.

Enrique had been a regular visitor to Indonesia since 1982, when tourism had just begun to establish a foothold in Bali and yet remained largely absent throughout the rest of the archipelago. But it was not surfing and sandy beaches that brought him all the way from Spain, rather the high-

lands of what was then referred to as Irian Jaya, the Indonesian western half of the huge island of New Guinea.

The highlands are formed by the Central Cordillera Mountain ranges, which stretch east to west across the vast expanse of New Guinea—the second largest island in the world. Cradled within those rugged mountains are a multitude of fertile river valleys which provide sustenance for a mosaic of agricultural-based tribal communities. Remarkably, it was not until the 1930s that these tribes experienced their “first contact” with outsiders.

West Papua

Irian Jaya (now known as West Papua) was, and continues to be, one of the most remote and untamed parts of Indonesia, and Enrique, together with a small group of fellow adventurers, was determined to explore those highlands. They embarked on a month-long trekking expedition through this wilderness, and numerous adventures unfolded as they journeyed from valley to valley, visiting and staying in remote tribal villages. Foremost of which was witnessing the sudden out-

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Ceremony for Pinisi boat building at Tanah Beru in Sulawesi (above); Ondina keel laying ceremony (top right); Ondina under construction at Tanah Beru (right)

break of an inter-tribal war that left them all stunned and more than a little concerned about what could have happened!

That adventure turned into a series of annual assignments leading trekking expeditions in the highlands, and after a few years, Enrique decided the timing was right to start a tourism-focused business in Indonesia. Initially the idea was establishing a resort for trekkers in the highlands, but over time the concept of building a boat and then using it to take divers around the archipelago was born.

The Bugis

But not just any boat... the idea was to take the prov-



COURTESY OF RICARD BUJO

en design of the traditional Indonesian sailing ships and build a customized version that would enable journeys of discovery to some of the remotest corners of the vast archipelago. So, Enrique went to South Sulawesi, home of

the Bugis—the accomplished seafarers who roamed the seas long before the first Europeans arrived in what was then known as the Malay Archipelago.

Equally feared and revered the Bugis are said to have

navigated by the stars as far as Madagascar to the west, China to the north, and the top-end of Australia to the south. They carry reputations as adventurers, warriors, slave runners and pirates, and are said to be the source of the English saying, “Watch out, the bogeyman will get you.”

In fact, they were also astute merchants who used their boats and seafaring skills to trade exotica far and wide. The Bugis built their own boats called *padewakangs* in South Sulawesi, and when the Dutch colonized what we now call Indonesia in the late 1700s, they did so in their European style sailing ships. Over time, many of the key features of

those European schooners were incorporated into the sailing ships built by the Bugis. Eventually the amalgamated design became known as the *pinisi*.

Building a pinisi

Enrique found the boat builders he needed in the village of Tanah Beru, near the town of Bira and while negotiating, realized there is no standard for a *pinisi* boat, with each build a function of wants, needs, customs and traditions. All these factors are discussed at length with the team building the boat—usually a family clan of shipwrights and carpenters, typically led by a construction manager who

is a “haji,” a Muslim who has completed his pilgrimage to Mecca and commands great respect. But even when the final concept is agreed, no formal plans drawn up or budgetary estimates are provided—the boat just evolves around what was discussed!

Finally, a deposit was paid, and the need for someone to supervise it all became rather urgent...

Living with the Bugis

Imagine, if you will, moving to a remote part of what was then a third-world country, to live among local boat-builders in basic conditions to supervise the construction of a traditional wooden boat—all without



The hull of the *Ondina* taking shape (left)



Pinisi boat building at Tanah Beru in Sulawesi (left, above and right)



an agreed final plan or budget, without speaking a word of the local language and with zero knowledge of local cus-

toms and traditions. But that was what Ricard did in June 2000, just as the keel of the yet unnamed boat was being laid.

Some 13 months later, the boat was launched and christened Sailing Motor Yacht (SMY) *Ondina*—the Nymph of the Deep Sea!

Ondina was not the first *pinisi* boat built for foreigners, but it was the first to be crafted as a dedicated liveaboard, and Ricard describes those 13 months as the most intense, challenging, but deeply satisfying period of his life, as the boat took shape on the beach at Tanah Beru.

His five years in Egypt had given him the strong foundation he needed for the total “cultural immersion” he went through in living with the Bugis,

learning how to communicate with them and ensuring that the pivotal details, which make *Ondina* such a great diving platform, were implemented.

A mystical process

Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world and is known for its secular brand of Islam and religious tolerance. Many of the racial groups that make up its almost 270 million people combine their version of Islam with historical myths and beliefs, which in many ways makes the country so interesting.

But the Bugis are amongst the most fascinating of those

groupings, combining a deeply superstitious nature with animistic traditions, rituals and legends, which are intertwined with how they build their *pinisi* boats. Everything has its place,

with the overall process guided by the haji, who has complete responsibility for the integrity of the construction and ensuring that all the traditions are followed properly and thoroughly.



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Laying the main deck of the *Ondina* (top left); Sealing the hull (top right); The pinisi boat under construction at Tanah Beru (right); The lounge and dining area under construction (left)

seas of the archipelago and even out in the open oceans—sailing at the whim of the elements and finding their way using the stars.

No detailed plans for the boat were ever made, or ever will be... There is no manual, the skills and methodology are transmitted orally and taught to younger members of the clan, who in turn pass them on to the next generation.

And then the hard part!

After *Ondina* was launched, the priority was fitting out the boat in preparation for the customers booked on the first trip. Ricard was kept exception-

ally busy supervising the fit-out while also hiring and training the first crew, dealing with the considerable paperwork and working out the routes *Ondina* would follow around the archipelago—not to mention where to dive!

Then, just 30 days before the first trip was to depart, the devastating 9/11 terrorist attacks occurred in New York, effectively shutting down all air travel globally. If you had to pick a worst date to launch a business in a Muslim country that requires tourists to fly long distances to get on board, October 2001 would probably meet all the selection criteria.



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From a western perspective, it would be easy to simply dismiss the spiritual element of building a boat as irrational

and irrelevant, but consider it from the Bugis point of view. The boats take their people far and wide in the monsoonal

But most of those who had booked made it to Indonesia, and *Ondina* left on that first voyage. So, maybe there is

something to those rituals and ceremonies the haji orchestrated as *Ondina* was built!





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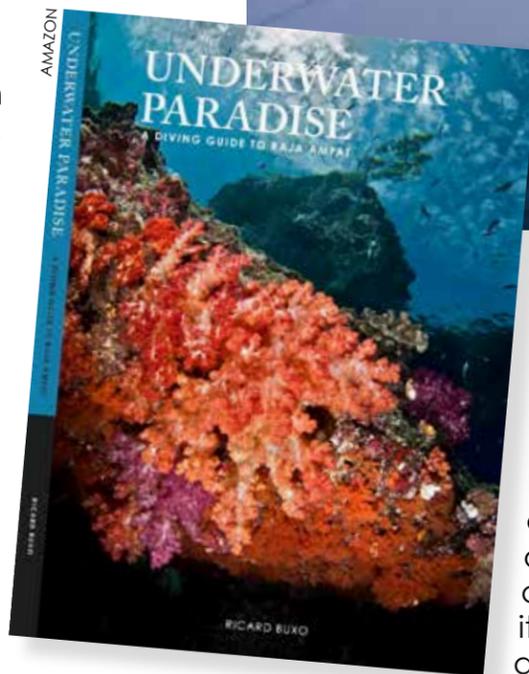
COURTESY OF RICARD BUJO

Ondina ready to be launched (above); A Pinisi is born! (right); Ricard Buxo's book, *The pre launch ceremony* (left)

Ricard to follow in their footsteps and sail with the monsoonal winds around the archipelago.

He started with the Lesser Sunda Islands, along the southeastern rim of the archipelago, concentrating on the areas around Komodo and Alor. With those first passengers discovering some of the very best spots—plus, they were the only boat in the area!

Then, after two years diving in the south, in October 2003, Ricard took *Ondina* north, across the huge expanse of the Banda Sea for the first time—a journey of some 1,000km to Sorong, in Raja Ampat, joining the small number of boats based there through to March each year. The area became Ricard's favourite part of the archipelago. So much so that he was one of the first people to write



A life well lived

Ricard stepped back from *Ondina* in 2015 and is now based in Bali, with his wife Paulina, from where he runs its overall operation, together with

a book about the area, *Underwater Paradise – A Diving Guide to Raja Ampat*. Which has become the standard for all guides operating in the area because of its excellent maps and descriptions of the sites covered.

those of its sister ship *MV Oceanic*. I catch up with him regularly to find out what is happening underwater across the archipelago, because the regular updates from both boats, plus his extensive contacts across the live-aboard industry in Indonesia, keep him very well informed!

Every liveaboard trip I have done in Indonesia since 2005 has been on the *Ondina*—why, you may wonder, when there are now over 100 to choose from? Two basic reasons... first, I have been on board in horrendous weather in the Banda Sea—the sort where you know exactly where your lifejacket is, but we made it through, and I trust the boat.

Secondly, everything about

Ondina, from the way the diving is run to the way the meals are prepared and served, just works as it should. Essentially, Ricard may not be on board that often, but the system he established continues to function as he intended it to do. For me, it is the perfect, proven platform to experience the many delights of underwater Indonesia! ■

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



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Exploring the Indonesian Archipelago—Follow the Bugis!

Indonesia is a vast archipelago of 16,000-plus islands, and in 2001, when scuba diving was in its infancy, there was virtually no public domain information available on where to dive and what the associated hazards might be. The only people to ask were the pioneers who had come before Ricard — Edi Frommenwiler, the late Larry Smith and Mark Heighes, all of whom generously shared their knowledge. But it was his time with the Bugis that inspired