

Raja Ampat

The Last Paradise on Earth

By Rachel Lovelock

While the predominant colour in the picture-postcard image of the tropics is blue, Raja Ampat is decidedly green...

Here, translucent turquoise waters lap the scorching white-sand beaches, coral reefs are identified by shining ribbons of aquamarine, and secret lagoons form the settings for emerald gems. The green theme persists in the deeper, distinctly jade-coloured channels that run between the many islands, morphing to milky mint in the narrow,

river-like passages, all of which reflect the unrelenting verdure of the thickly forested hills.

Raja Ampat has been described as the “Last Paradise on Earth,” one of the most noteworthy ecological niches on the planet, on a par with the Great Barrier Reef and the Galápagos. Marine biologists have established that it is home to 70 percent of the known coral species on the planet. Many of the fish, corals, and crustaceans that live in these waters are found nowhere else on Earth.

Straddling the Equator off the extreme northwestern tip of Indonesia's Papua province, the region is an archipelago of 610 islands; a figure that can be boosted to more than 1500 if you count the karst islets, which are so undercut by waves that they look like mushrooms, topped with rich jungle to create an astonishing, polka dot topography. The larger islands are distinguished by rugged coastlines covered with virgin rainforest extending right down to the water's edge, where nature has carved out a series of coves and lagoons, inlets, caves, and shaded, sandy beaches. If truth be told, the pure, unadulterated splendour of Raja Ampat astounds anyone who ventures the enormous distance to get there, and just recently I was fortunate enough to be one of those venturers.

I was a guest on a SeaTrek Sailing Adventure, which took us on a northerly voyage from the West Papuan capital of

Sorong to the island of Waigeo and then across the Equator to the iconic islands of Wayag and beyond. While most of the cruises through Raja Ampat are on liveaboard dive boats, SeaTrek's activities focus on trekking, snorkelling, swimming, kayaking, and paddle-boarding. Each day, we donned fins, masks, and snorkels and explored a below-surface world reminiscent of a living kaleidoscope. Navigating my way through coral bommies, tables, steeples, fans, and thorny stag-horn thickets, I swam through clouds of damsel fish, gawped at an ornate but venomous lionfish, spotted a huge puffer fish skulking in the shadows, and counted Christmas tree worms galore glued to the brain corals in a whole gamut of colours. So beautiful was this underwater ecosystem that at times I felt like I was in a giant aquarium, expecting to swim up against a wall of glass at any moment, with families of onlookers regarding me from the other side.

Above the surface, Raja Ampat presents an extraordinary wealth of exotic bird life, with hornbills, kingfishers, parrots, and five different bird of paradise species including the fabulous red bird of paradise. Our voyage, therefore, took us to the island of Gam with the knowledge that every morning at dawn, during mating season, at the very top of the tallest tree, way up high on a forested ridge, the red birds of paradise come out to perform their elaborate courtship dance.

No other bird family is as beautiful or displays such a diversity of plumage, extravagant decoration, and courtship behaviour as the ostentatious birds of paradise, of which there are 39 species, ranging from the size of a tiny starling to big, crow-sized birds, with certain types sporting tails of up to three times their body length.

We set out in the dark, at 5:00 a.m. on a wet and windy morning, for a slippery 40-minute hike up a steep, muddy

track in the hope that the rain would stop in time for the birds to appear and doing their thing. Happily for us, the sky cleared and the sun came out, as did the birds. We heard them before we saw them, the males using their voices to broadcast their location and entice distant females to come and have a look. Then, silhouetted against the light of the new day, four males entered the canopied arena, their tail wires streaming behind them. Five minutes later, the arrival of two females, distinguished by their lack of ornamentation, sent the males into an ecstatic frenzy, each one lowering his head and erecting his plumes over his back. What makes for such a sexy blend of attire and choreography is a mystery, but the more excessive the better, and all with the single purpose of attracting female attention. As the sky got brighter, we were able to see their gorgeous colours – the male's yellow beak, his iridescent

emerald-green face, a pair of dark green cushion-like feather pompoms above each eye and a train of glossy red plumes. One of the males postured stiffly before hanging upside down from his branch. He then spread, fanned, and fluttered his wings like a giant butterfly, seducing his prize for us all to see.

The sun was shining brightly when we emerged from the steamy jungle at the jetty from where we had begun our adventure three hours earlier, and we were able to see the enchanting little village of Saporkren, which we had bypassed in the dark. If the birds of paradise live in Paradise, then Saporkren must be the gateway. A big archway marked the entrance to the village, with a cheerful welcome message, and hand-painted images of the birds. The place was idyllic, a quintessential paradise beach with soft white-gold sand, coconut palms,

gaily-painted canoes, friendly families, happy smiling children, and pellucid luminous-turquoise waters. The final delight was when one of the villagers drew our attention to a cuscus eyeing us from the top of a fig tree. He was the size of a big pussycat with a pointy snout, ginger face, huge round orange eyes, and a tail long enough to wrap around a branch and strong enough to support his weight. A local woman handed me a banana attached to the end of a long stick; the cuscus took the bait and obligingly posed for a photo.

It was only 8:00 a.m., the day had barely begun and yet I had already witnessed the dating dance of the rare red birds of paradise and now I was feeding a banana to a spotted cuscus. Paradise indeed! To experience this verdant paradise for yourself, go to www.SeaTrekBali.com.