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Swim with whale sharks at this seldom-visited reef

A 10-day cruise through Indonesia's Raja Ampat in a 12-cabin pinisi ship is a feast of snorkelling, relaxing and delectable delicacies.



The boat trip offers the opportunity to swim among whale sharks. **Alamy**

Hannah Wootton [[/by/hannah-wootton-hlgmvp](#)] *Columnist*

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Venturing out on a dinghy before 6am on a patch of ocean just west of Timor, I'm nervous. Swimming with whale sharks is supposed to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience, but I've already failed at it twice.

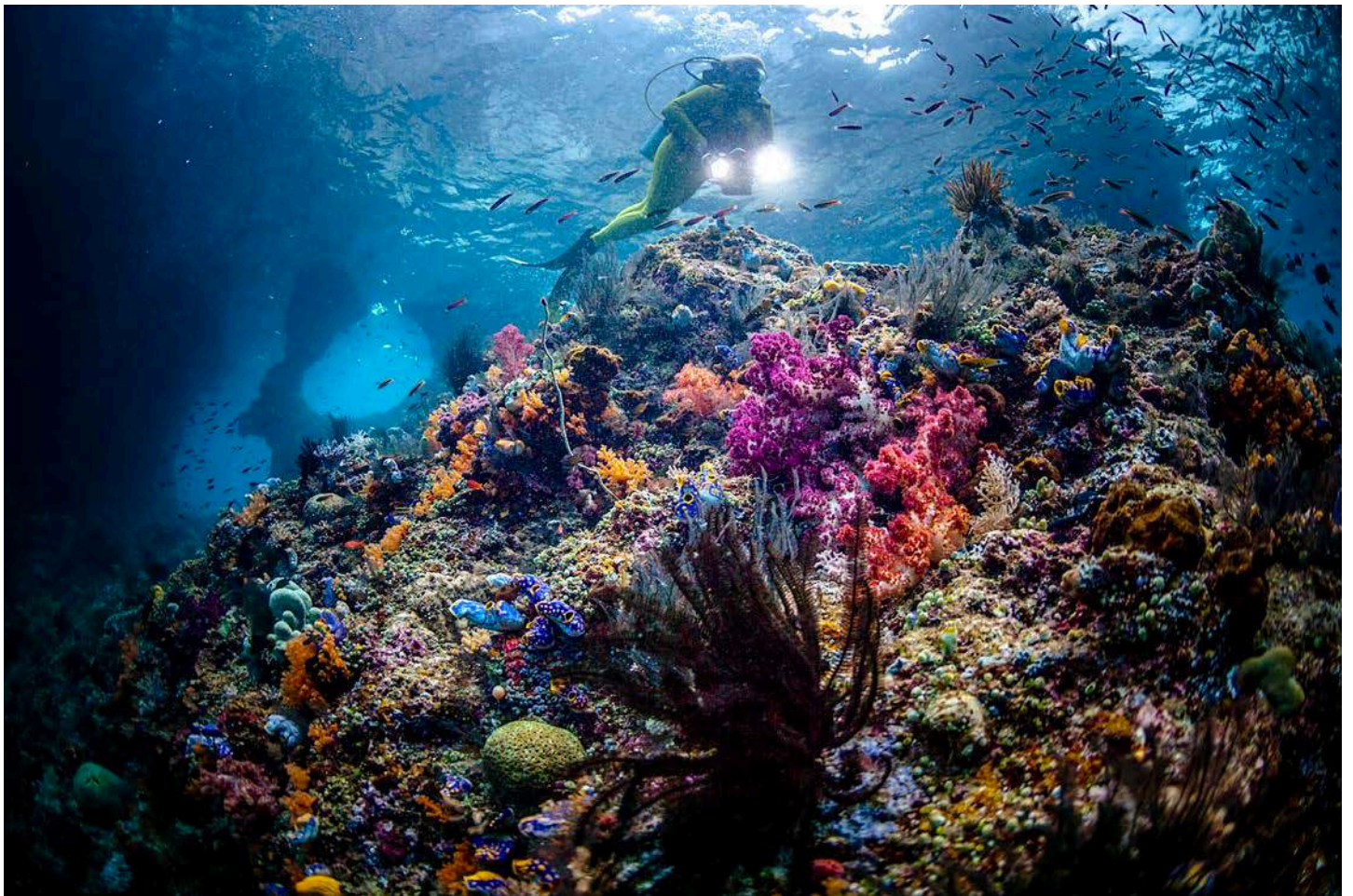
Perhaps the whale sharks of Indonesia's Raja Ampat won't be as shy as the ones in Western Australia [<https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/travel/swimming-with-sharks-off-ningaloo-reef-20190920-p52ta0>].



View from the lushly vegetated Wayag Islands in Raja Ampat. **Alamy**

I'm at the start of a glorious cruise with a dozen fellow whale shark fans aboard the Ombak Putih, a 12-cabin traditional wooden pinisi ship. It has taken nearly 24 hours to get here from Melbourne, despite being closer to Australia than Bali. In return, we are sailing through an archipelago that is home to some of the most magnificent and least visited reefs in the world.

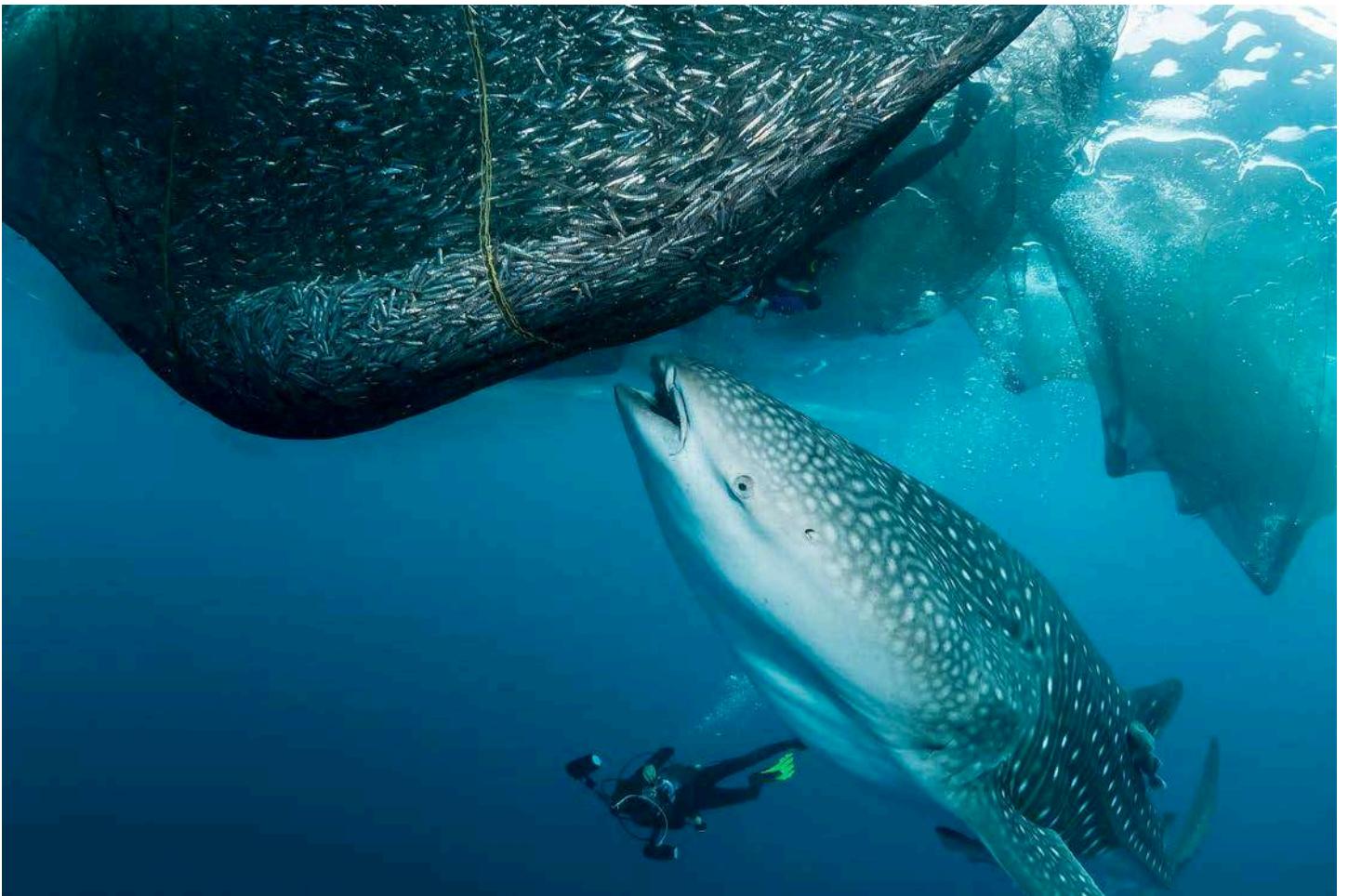
As the sun breaks, we jump in the water. There are four whale sharks – three adults and one juvenile – all swarming the *bagan* fishing nets we are bobbing up and down beside.



The spectacular corals of Raja Ampat. **Getty Images**

The adults are roughly the size of a bus, their backs a galaxy of blue and grey spots gleaming against the dark blue ocean. Smaller fish hang onto or under their fins, taking the current they produce for a ride.

They swim down deep then dart up again to eat. Sometimes you don't even realise one is there until it's hitting you (gently, of course, and despite our best efforts not to touch them, as instructed). We can hear dolphins even deeper beneath them too, a series of clicks that has even our guides, Jemy and Tinae, excited.



Whale sharks feed from fisherman's nets in the waters of Raja Ampat. **Getty Images**

On Water Expeditions run this trip only four times a year (once in each direction for each of their two boats). There are people aboard who booked it a full 12 months ago, and several who are repeat patrons of the company. One of the trip highlights is swimming in a giant, 30-degree lake full of stingless jellyfish. Another is getting up before dawn to trek to see birds of paradise dancing. We swim through a giant underwater cave. I make everyone turn their torches off and stop talking. We float in the darkness, slivers of light poking through cracks in the rock and no sound beyond our breaths.



A lake is full of stingless jellyfish. **Getty Images**

Even zipping around some of Raja Ampat's 612 islands on dinghies is fun. Dense forest hangs over the edge of each island in vibrant green clumps, broken only to reveal ancient hand paintings on the rock underneath.

As we buzz past them, we pick fruit off the trees and crack them open, dunking them in seawater to counteract their sweetness with salt, a precursor to the regional flavours coming out of the ship's tiny galley kitchen.



The writer sailed on the Ombak Putih.

We traverse Indonesia in our meals, enjoying various regional specialties. The on-board menu includes whole giant trevally, dolphin fish, snapper, *bangus* (milkfish) and fresh salads so good I try to discern their ingredients to recreate them at home (navy beans, mango, papaya and fresh chilli are all frequent additions).

Both the variety of food and its freshness defy logic, given the space and location constraints the chefs are working under. The seafood is a stalwart, but every lunch and dinner offers both chicken and beef options too. One morning, one of the staff proudly presents me and my travel companion with a bottle of proper maple syrup, to serve with the banana pancakes I'm developing an addiction to.



Ombak Putih is a 12-cabin traditional wooden pinisi ship.

As the trip progresses to more populated islands (a relative term – the populations still sit in the double digits), the food ramps up even more. At breakfast one morning, another passenger laments to me that she just ate the last egg on board. Within 10 minutes, more eggs are acquired from one of the many long boats that appear beside the Ombak Putih to replenish its stores.

After snorkelling one day, we stand on the deck, eating hot banana fritters with greasy fingers and babbling excitedly about the fish we saw, the salt on our fingers offsetting the Nutella we smear on them.

Each night we're presented with lessons on the sea life we will encounter the next day, the history of Raja Ampat or the pinisi, which I'm sceptical about; I've always questioned people who are deeply into boats, similar to those who get a kick out of big cars. But all I needed to see was the crew unfurling its seven sails, deftly scurrying up ladders and tugging ropes into place, to be convinced of its majesty.



Raja Ampat is a sanctuary for sea turtles, including the Hawksbill turtle.

When kids are aboard, the crew sets up activities for them. This is more common in school holidays though, and our group is largely retirees (Australians) or those edging towards it (several Europeans and two Americans, some of which are on adult gap years).

Relaxation is the order of the day between meals, spent napping or reading and trading books from the communal shelf. In the afternoon, people sip cocktails (there's a full bar on board run off an honesty system, but the Australian contingent came prepared with their own spirits), sketch the ocean and look up what fish we've seen in guidebooks.

The crew cheer the dinghies when they return from each day trip and have chilled juices waiting for whoever has ventured out. More often than not, they've also dried our beach towels between our morning and afternoon swims.



The sea gardens of Raja Ampat are hotspots of biodiversity. **Alamy**

What's more, the guides remember everyone's preferences and needs: nervous or tired swimmers are handed pool noodles to help with snorkelling, and those who need more support for physical activities are offered alternatives so they don't miss out.

After days without seeing other boats and even longer without phone service, it's not until the final two nights in the busy Waisai and Sorong harbours that we have any sense that a world exists beyond our patch of ocean.



Isolated in a lake, these jellyfish have evolved to no longer use stingers as a survival tool.

We finish the last night with a party, dancing together on the deck, before our dinghies head to shore the next morning. As we wave goodbye, we all agree that the short-lived serenity on board was a tonic to the tumultuous times we live in.

The writer travelled as a guest of On Water Expeditions.

Need to know

- ◆ Sailing | [On Water Expeditions'](https://onwaterexpeditions.com/indonesia/boat-based-cruising-sailing/papuas-whale-sharks-birds-of-paradise-aboard-ombak-putih) [https://onwaterexpeditions.com/indonesia/boat-based-cruising-sailing/papuas-whale-sharks-birds-of-paradise-aboard-ombak-putih] 10-day Papua's Whale Sharks & Birds of Paradise aboard Ombak Putih starts at \$US7900 (\$12,400) per person twin-share. The next sailing departs December 5.
- ◆ Fly | The trip departs from Kaimana, Indonesia. From Australia, fly into Kaimana Utarom Airport via Jakarta or Denpasar. It disembarks in Sorong, Indonesia, with flights on to Jakarta or Bali.



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