



# A remote adventure TO WILDLIFE-RICH ASIA

Cruising provides a smooth gateway to Raja Ampat, Indonesia's pristine marine park, finds Chris Morley.

I'm floating above a psychedelic coral garden, kicking lazily in the tepid current. Ahead, my guide Tinae points towards what looks like a cluster of seaweed-wrapped rocks. As my eyes focus, I realise it's a huddle of broadclub cuttlefish, their entwined tentacles wafting like algae. We watch as one rises and morphs into a sleek cephalopod with neon-blue flickering skin, before powering away like a space craft.

This Attenborough-like encounter is typical of my cruise around Raja Ampat. These protected waters off West Papua span roughly the size of Denmark and are studded with around 1,500 islands, with only 35 inhabited. Until recently, its undersea riches - whale sharks, manta rays, turtles and 75% of all coral species

- were known mainly to scuba divers. But travelling on a traditional wooden pinisi boat, nimbly crewed around delicate reefs by an all-Indonesian crew, makes this distant archipelago accessible for others.

Over 10 days, our 12-berth vessel carves a loop around two of the four largest islands. As we breeze deeper into the blue and drop out of phone signal, not a single ship breaks the horizon. It's the closest I've felt to stepping off the map and into the pages of an adventure book.

## *Sorong starter*

My journey begins at Sorong port, where I join 16 fellow passengers - Australians, Americans, British and Europeans - on board the Ombak Putih, a tall-masted ship operated by

Bali-based Sea Trek and hand-built by local Bugis people. Our wood-panelled cabins have plenty of storage, en suite bathrooms and (hurrah!) air conditioning.

After a night's sailing, we anchor in Tomolol Bay. While some guests greet the day with yoga on the top deck or paddleboard across the glassy water to a distant atoll, I lie on a lounge and watch dolphins draw a perfect arc above the water.

We set off in Zodiacs to see prehistoric paintings at Sumalelen: ochre impressions of hands and leaping fish on limestone rocks. Then we snorkel around the base of a cliff, waving madly at each other when we spy something weird and wonderful: a giant clam, red lionfish, blue-spotted stingray and

## memorable cruises

a crocodile fish half-buried in the sandy floor. The concentration of underwater life is mind-blowing.

We return to a whooping and clapping crew (a ritual performed after every excursion), wipe the salt from our faces with chilled flannels and slake our thirst with iced juice. That night, after dinner and cocktails, the beauty of the seascape is amplified by the crew singing lilting Papuan songs and strumming ukeleles.

### *Cultural encounters*

While the sea life is magical, so are the communities we are privileged to meet. At Kapacol, a fishing village of around 50 families, the crew bring gifts of prescription glasses for the elders and stationery for the kids, who line up in the church to sing for us at the tops of their voices. Their joy is infectious, and we leave beaming. As we walk past tin-roofed homes on stilts and men bent over fishing nets, our guide Dion explains about 'sasi', the local culture of conservation. Mindful of the sea's fragile ecosystem, the villagers rotate the fishing of vulnerable species to allow stocks to recover. At another village, Marandan, we are gifted fronds of bougainvillea at the jetty and young women, decorated with white body paint and wearing feather-and shell-headaddresses, perform a dance routine backed by a village band.

### *Beach encounters*

Every day brings something new, whether it's a morning idling on a castaway beach where the crew have prepared a buffet of grilled snapper,



or a walk through a mangrove forest to cool off in a waterfall. Evenings start with a pre-dinner drink and talk on local wildlife and customs, followed by feasts of chicken, tempeh and fish (occasionally lobster), rainbow platters of salads,

vegetables and rice. I add spoonfuls of fiery sambal – a staple of Indonesian cooking – to everything, and take notes when chef Atin shares her recipe with an impromptu cookery demo.

Most evenings we relax on deck or swim off the boat. One night, as dusk falls I watch a dark stream of bats leaving a nearby island for a night's hunting. After 15 minutes, I leave to top up my margarita and the bats are still going strong. Another time, idly gazing into the water from the deck, I spy a 'bait ball' whirling just under the surface. This swirling sphere of fish is a defence against predators. Not a foolproof one, though, as the shadowed form of a squid plunges into the ball, again and again, to snatch a meal.

Raja Ampat is also bird-watching heaven. On a pre-dawn trek on Waisai island, the forest vibrates with whirring insects and screeching birds. From a treetop hide, I witness the eccentric courtship dance



Set sail with a friendly crew who will show you the islands' magical wildlife



of a red bird-of-paradise. A second trek is less successful. Silently sweating in a humid hide, I hear the piercing whoops of a Wilson's bird-of-paradise ring ever closer, but only glimpse his blue cap and crimson wings. He's not in the mood to dance. A shame, but then it's just another compelling reason to revisit this astonishing archipelago.

### *BOOK IT*

✦ A 10-day full-board Jewels of Raja Ampat cruise costs from £5,936, including airport transfers but excluding flights and crew tips; [seatrekballi.com](http://seatrekballi.com) >>



womanandhome.com 165

## *IT'S LIKE STEPPING OFF THE MAP*

