

Escape to Indonesia

Steve Leland travels the world in style. This issue, he's swimming with whale sharks thanks to SeaTrek Sailing Adventures.

by Steve Leland

GONNA PUT THE WORLD AWAY FOR A MINUTE AND PRETEND I DON'T LIVE IN IT...

Inspired by the words from a Zac Brown Band song, I made my escape halfway around the globe to Kaimana, West Papua. Hidden, untouched, and unknown, I hadn't heard of it ... but adventures of discovery begin in secret places like this.

West Papua is just one of Indonesia's fantasy destinations, a place where lush jungles rise sharply from the coast, waterfalls tumble into hidden pools, and mountains shrouded in mist seem to touch the sky.

If you're inclined to travel along vicariously, picture yourself aboard SeaTrek Sailing Adventures' 24-passenger *Ombak Putih*, a traditional twin-masted pinisi that hints at softcore swashbuckling, yet is outfitted with modern comforts that encourage relaxed, sun-kissed indulgence. Pack your flip-flops and sun-ready sportswear, and set your imagination to full throttle.



Steve Leland (boys), artfifsov - stock.adobe.com (whale shark). All other images courtesy of SeaTrek Sailing Adventures



Whale shark



Raja Ampat



Yet, nothing compares to the sheer exhilaration of gliding beside Indonesia’s gentle whale sharks.

BUT THE PLANE BROUGHT ME FARTHER, I’M SURROUNDED BY WATER...

This experience redefines luxury, trading the glow of crystal chandeliers for the grandeur of a twinkling starlit sky. Here, days are punctuated by three delicious meals served alfresco on the open deck. Below, the sultry tropical nights are softened by climate-controlled cabins, each featuring a private en-suite bathroom and a refined nautical charm.

While technically a cruise, the experience feels more like a deep dive into a tropical dream. As you glide between islands, the boundary between the ship and the exotic wild disappears at the waterline.

Greeted by the warm smiles of the crew during embarkation, I was instantly reminded of my first cruise aboard the *Ombak Putih* eight years ago. Back then, we explored the stunning Komodo Island, Lombok, and other hidden gems. That unforgettable experience sparked a vow to return with my sights set on something truly extraordinary: swimming with the majestic whale sharks of Indonesia. Ten days of anticipation-filled snorkeling, rich cultural interaction, and awe-inspiring encounters with Mother Nature’s wonders held the promise of an extra-special journey.

Good fortune has allowed me to swim alongside sea lions and sea turtles, to snorkel above graceful manta rays, and to witness some of the world’s most vivid coral reefs. Yet, nothing compares to the sheer exhilaration of gliding beside Indonesia’s gentle whale sharks.

Although these giants are called “whale” sharks, these magnificent creatures are neither whales nor aggressive like most sharks. In fact, they are the world’s largest fish, a testament to Nature’s grand scheme. Seemingly undisturbed

by our presence, they swam effortlessly around us, their enormous mouths wide open, filtering plankton and small fish as we gazed directly into their tiny eyes.

That morning’s indelible encounter was followed by a thrilling Zodiac ride along the coast, where ancient rock art from thousands of years ago adorns the cliffs. With the initial day far from over, late afternoon found us planting new coral fragments guided by the onboard naturalist, a gesture aligned with SeaTrek’s commitment to marine sustainability.

THIS CHAMPAGNE SHORE WASHING OVER ME, IT’S A SWEET, SWEET LIFE LIVING BY THE SALTY SEA...

Shortly after sunrise, we breached the secrecy of a hidden trail behind tiny Karawawi Village, traversing secluded streams and clambering over limestone boulders.

The trek was no small feat, but every step was redeemed the moment we reached a thundering waterfall bursting through the meditative jungle-scape, shattering the stillness in the most spectacular way.

The day of waterfall-chasing continued as we watched another magnificent cascade of water plummet straight into the turquoise sea with an after-lunch snorkel outing sandwiched in for good measure.

A walk through the village of Aduwei offered a vivid glimpse into SeaTrek’s dedication to supporting the indigenous communities along its routes. In this remote coastal village, where daily life unfolds against a backdrop of jungle-covered hills, the company has established a school library, providing children with books, learning materials, and a welcoming space to explore new ideas. Their continued support



Wilson's bird of paradise



helps open doors to brighter futures through education, a resource that can be scarce in such isolated regions.

Another morning was spent contributing to a hands-on conservation project where guests join local residents in planting young mangrove seedlings along the shoreline, carefully tucking each fragile shoot into the soft, silty earth. These new mangroves will one day form a protective barrier against erosion, strengthen the coastal ecosystem, and support the village's long-term resilience.

There were countless afternoons

felt like drifting through a dream from which you never want to wake. Meandering through its bewildering maze of aquamarine channels puts you into a world where every turn reveals something new. One of these slender passages led to a secluded lake, where countless stingless jellyfish pulsed gently beneath the surface, capturing your curiosity in the most unexpected way.

From the lofty perch of the lookout on Playnemo, the incredible views of exotic limestone islands surrounded by turquoise sea were a fitting finale

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spent wading knee-deep through aquamarine waters, toes buried in powder-white sand on deserted tropical atolls. I accepted that hunting for even a whisper of cell service was a lost cause, but my only real concern was how quickly the tide was creeping up, intent on kidnapping my beach towel. Could anything top this? As unbelievable as it sounds... absolutely.

With three-quarters of the world's marine species calling the Coral Triangle home, daily snorkeling was downright next-level. To deepen our understanding of this underwater realm, the onboard naturalist offered nightly presentations, illuminating the complex lives of corals, the creatures that depend on them, and the vital role these ecosystems play in the health of our oceans and ourselves.

TAKE ONE PART SAND, AND ONE PART SEA, AND ONE SHADE OF BANANA TREE...

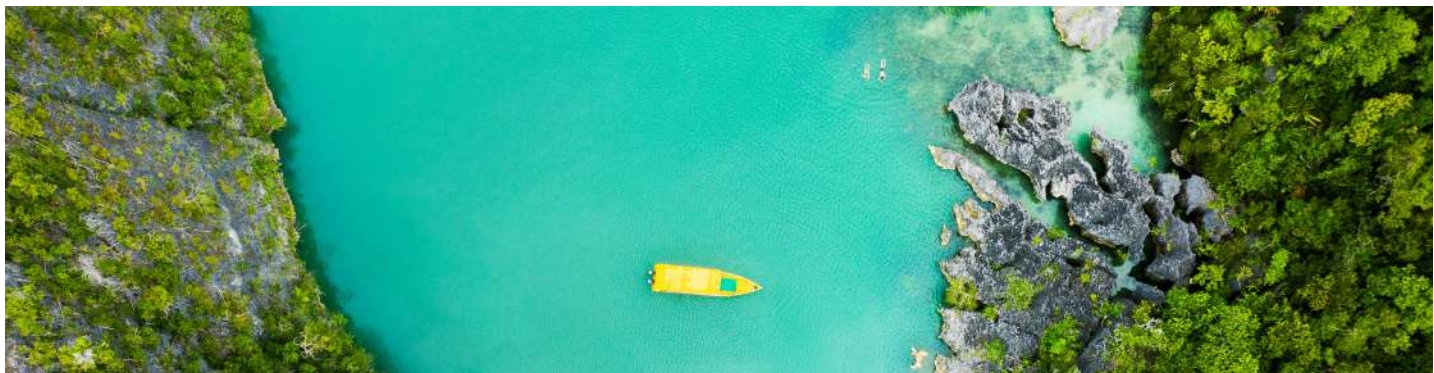
Midway through this 10-day treasure hunt of Indonesia's hidden wonders, the jagged karst spires of Raja Ampat rose into view. Sailing through the 600-plus islands of this magic archipelago

to the adventure ... but there was an encore yet to be viewed. That performance belonged to the colorful courtship dance of the endemic red bird of paradise. Trekking through the verdant jungle to a secluded viewing platform secured us a front-row seat to this spectacular ritual. There, in the filtered morning light, the bird erupted into a dazzling display with plumes flaring, as we witnessed one of nature's most extraordinary scenes.

THERE'S A PLACE WHERE THE BOAT LEAVES FROM. IT TAKES AWAY ALL OF YOUR BIG PROBLEMS...

Sailing on a vessel like this isn't so much about what it does for you, but more about what it does to you. It changes expectations and alters the way you see things, exposing what is really important in a vacation.

I won't pretend that getting here from the U.S. was just a hop, skip and a jump, but that's all part of the adventure. Travel like this isn't merely a change of scenery, it's a permission slip to wander, sip, drift, and maybe forget where you left that ordinary life behind. ●



Terence W/PeopleImages.com - stock.adobe.com (aerial shot of boat). All other images courtesy of Seatek Sailing Adventures