

Eastern promise

After days of travel, Christine Ingram of Plymouth Sound BSAC finally reached the fabled reefs of Rajah Ampat, where she experienced truly world class diving

We had planned our trip to the Raja Ampat on the eastern fringes of Indonesia aboard the MY Amira liveaboard 14 months prior to the trip itself. It seemed a long time coming, but it was to prove well worth the wait and the interminable long haul flights.

To name my favourite dive on this voyage would be extremely difficult as all the sites are amazing, with a good mix of sheer walls, beautiful reefs, muck diving, more than 600 species of coral, a huge variety of colourful macro creatures and numerous fish species of all sizes. We saw an incredible array of creatures, from anemone fish, anemone crabs, pygmy seahorses, bumphead parrotfish to wobbegong sharks and the wonderful manta rays. In short, Rajah Ampat is a hotspot of biodiversity – this area has been rightly called a species factory by leading marine biologists and the Amira visits the most beautiful dive sites of Raja Ampat. While we were muck diving on one particular site, a sizeable estuarine salt-water crocodile (approximately 3-4m in length) was seen.

The seawater in this area ranges between 28-29°C, and the visibility around 30m; most experienced divers will find the going is easy, with just a few mild currents. The Amira is designed with plenty of space for kitting-up, with a fixed station for each diver, several rinse tanks, plenty of deck space and a large camera room. All in all, it proved an ideal base camp.

One of my favourite sites was Blue Magic, which has a good reputation for pelagic action. You can find many species of ocean-going fish here, including tunas, grey reef sharks,

barracudas, manta rays, and jacks. The reef comprises many small pinnacles and one large bommie, which is the main cleaning station for the mantas that frequent the locale.

Divers are transported from the Amira to the site by speedboat. From the moment you descend down to the reef you are surrounded by fish, in particular the different species of batfish that are waiting to greet you. Watching the manta rays approach their pinnacle is easy, and there's no need to hide or attach a reef hook – they just rock up and once the first arrives they are joined by many others.

We enjoyed an hour watching the mantas feeding, being cleaned and dancing around the pinnacle, not knowing where to look next as there was also a green turtle swimming around, and the reef was thick with nudibranchs.

Another favourite site was Boo Windows. Unfortunately there were no manta rays, but plenty of marine life with walls and seabed carpeted with multi-coloured soft corals. Round the corner from the sheer wall are the magical windows themselves: oval

shaped holes big enough to swim through, have eroded into a seamount, protruding above the waves at different heights according to the tide. These caverns are often home to glassfish and the region's trademark oriental sweetlips.

At the end of the dive we finished off on top of the reef at five metres, looking for the rare white-spotted pygmy seahorse while encountering Napoleon wrasse and bumphead parrotfish on the safety stop.

This trip was simply world-class. Every dive was a delight; the Amira was the most comfortable liveaboard we have used, the crew was very accommodating and the food was amazing. We had 11 nights and 12 days on board the Amira and I managed to complete 35 outstanding dives. ●

To find out more check out Amira's website www.amira-indonesia.com Christine booked her trip via Ben Stokes at www.divesafariasia.com

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