

# YOUR BUCKET LIST DESTINATION

By Arlie Haft

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## Raja Ampat Biodiversity Resort

Corner any experienced diver into naming the destination they dream about and the answer will very likely be Raja Ampat. If they haven't yet been there, it is surely number one on their bucket list. If they have indeed revelled in those aqua waters, they're no doubt fantasising about the day they can return.

The Indonesian archipelago of Raja Ampat lies in the Coral Triangle. This expanse of 40 000 square kilometres of marine territory and pristine reefs make these waters a diving haven second to none. Reputed to be the most biodiverse marine habitat on Earth, Raja Ampat is home to many species not found anywhere else.

While Raja Ampat has long been a magnet for more experienced divers, the steady upsurge in offerings is attracting new devotees enchanted by the area's holy grail of diving. Long shut out of these beautiful waters, today's guests might have beginner certifications with only a few dives under their belt. Some may be diving for the first time, while others may not be diving at all. But none of that is stopping visitors from making the well-worth-the-effort journey to discover the wonders of this coveted region.

Raja Ampat consists of more than 1 500 small islands, cays and shoals. One of the region's jewels is the smaller, but still sizeable, island of Gam. Easily accessible, Gam is in the heart of the Dampier Straight, which rightfully claims some of the

most famous dive sites in the world. Traversing Gam, fortunate beachcombers encounter a long, breath-taking strip of white sandy beach known locally as Pantai Yenanas. The beach is home to the Raja Ampat Biodiversity Resort. Imagine rising in the early morning and heading to your deck to be greeted by dolphins playing in the deep blue sea. All of that before your morning coffee.

The Raja Ampat Biodiversity Resort was dreamt up and designed by Rey Andaluz and Patricia Sanz. Originating from Spain, the charming couple holidayed in Raja Ampat some five years ago, in what turned out to be a life-changing trip. They became so enamoured, they knew at once that this was the place to make their vision come alive.

Raja Ampat Biodiversity Resort grew out of the passion that drives Rey and Patricia. They continue to consciously and environmentally build and invest to provide a holiday destination that encourages guests to experience the heavenly environs of Raja Ampat. While they acknowledge that the island of Gam was selected for its beauty, it was also chosen for its proximity to Waisai, making the resort accessible and affordable. Daily ferries bring guests from Sorong to Waisai and then a relaxing 30-minute boat ride brings you to this idyllic getaway. This schedule allows the guests the flexibility to arrange dates around their own plans.

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The resort is designed to connect guests with nature in this celebrated dive destination. From the range of accommodations and excursions, to the finger-licking, delicious food and safe diving, to the engaging, caring staff, every detail has been planned to ensure not only an amazing holiday, but also to provide a real taste for this area and Indonesia.

Entering the resort feels like entering a friend's home. A huge outdoor communal area welcomes guests to gather, relax and swap stories about their day. Imagine a comfortable, relaxed dining room where family-style meals are served. Dishes are varied and delicious with emphasis on Indonesian cuisine and sprinkles of recipes adapted from Patricia's Spanish roots. High quality ingredients are locally sourced as far as possible. Fishermen arrive by boat to sell their daily catch (no reef fish) and villagers bring homegrown fruits and vegetables.

Conservation goes beyond the kitchen, however. "Dirty" oil from generators and compressors is used to protect the wooden structures, while the compressors' carbon and molecular run-off is made into bricks. The environmental efforts go on: a major investment to build a solar panel; construction that utilises traditional Papuan building materials purchased from nearby villages. The strong commitment to conservation that lies at the heart of this eco resort makes for a neighbour that purchases local timber, virgin coconut oil, weavings for the roof and woodcarvings.

Then there is the staff: some 95% of the employees from neighbouring villages are new to the hospitality industry. Trained on site and treated like family, they play an important role in assuring that guests enjoy their visit.

Naturally (pun intended) the most popular reason to visit Raja Ampat – although it is stunning above the surface – is for the magic that happens underwater. The area is home to nearly 600 species of coral, including 75% of all coral species known in the world, as well as at least 1 074 fish species.

Imagine descending into the big blue, encountering a rainbow of colours in the vibrant, thriving reefs. The marine

invertebrates create a kaleidoscope that stuns the eyes of the most seasoned divers. Schools of fusiliers and jacks sway in the currents, bumphead parrotfish chomp away on the corals, shy Denise's pygmy seahorses hide among gorgonian coral and white- and blacktip reef sharks patrol effortlessly through the sea.

Dive sites include Blue Magic, where majestic mantas, grey reef sharks, and schools of bigeye trevally and barracudas put on a spectacular show. Sardine Reef, with a top of 5m, offers one of the best reef dives in all its glory. Unforgettable, too, is Cape Kri that put Raja Ampat on the map when Dr. Gerry Allen smashed his record for the total number of fish species on a single tank dive – 374 species!

Further excursions can easily be organised to equally desirable dive locations including Manta Sandy, known for its manta cleaning station, Fam Island, with marine-rich dive sites and the Penemu lookout point where you see the famous "mushroom" islands from above.

But the time may come when guests feel water logged and seek other diversions. That is when the resort's kayaks provide a different view of Gam and a trip to the local villages for a tour. The area around Gam Island harbours floral and forested habitats, home to a wide array of birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, butterflies and plants. Indulge in a jungle trek and you help the resort give back to the local economy. These walks are led by guides from neighbouring Yenbeser Village, whose depth of knowledge of the local flora and fauna is unmatched. But the main attraction is the rare Red Bird-of-paradise; spectacularly plumaged, they inhabit special trees only 45 minutes from the resort.

On returning from a day in the deep sea, the woods, or the villages, Rey and Patricia are always about to answer questions, share knowledge and recommendations and help guests enjoy an experience of a lifetime. Lovers of nature are coming to Raja Ampat, and rightfully so. Thankfully, there are still pristine and relatively unexplored places; they are well worth discovering and protecting.

