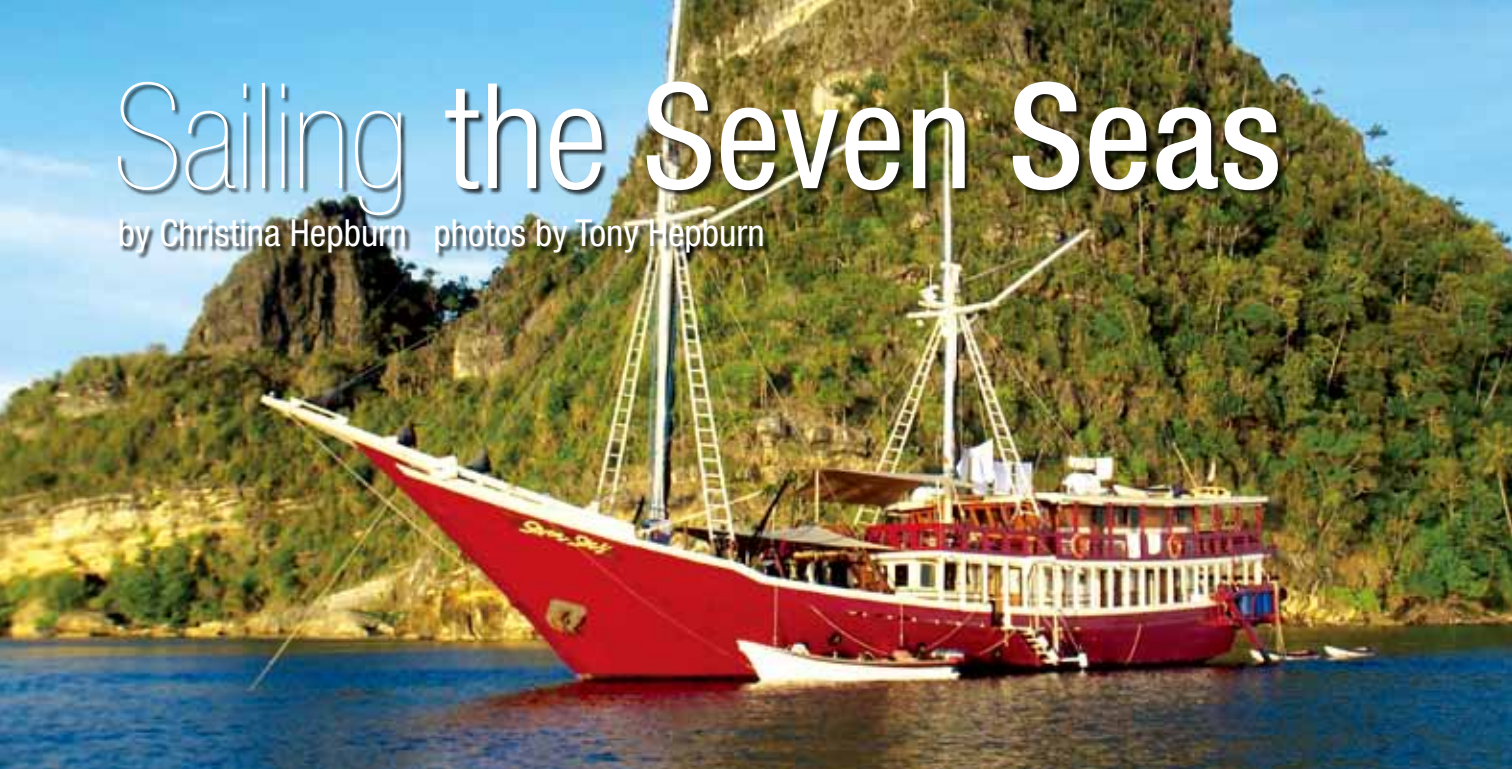


# Sailing the Seven Seas

by Christina Hepburn photos by Tony Hepburn



I am a fanatical diver, and a PADI dive instructor. Having both a travel-agent license and a real-estate license also serves my husband and me well. We take several dive trips a year to warm and tropical destinations. One recent trip demonstrated how rewarding and relatively inexpensive dive travel can be.

We stumbled onto the *Seven Seas* liveaboard in Indonesia by luck, when a friend invited me and my husband, Tony Hepburn, to join a private charter in the spring of the following year. It was early October and I had just found out that the liveaboard we had reserved in the Maldives had run aground on a reef and was out of commission. I decided to postpone the Maldives trip and find another exciting destination where I could easily re-route our Vancouver-to-Singapore connection.

On the same day that I cancelled our Maldivian vacation, I received an email from Jos Pet, one of the three partners who own the *Seven Seas*, saying that the *Seven Seas* was available for an 11-day Raja Ampat cruise. Raja Ampat is in the Coral Triangle, a hotbed of biodiversity. It didn't take much convincing for my husband and me to decide this was the boat for us. We needed to charter the whole boat, and we were fortunate enough to be able to bring together several friends to make it work.

Getting to the *Seven Seas* is an adventure in itself. We flew from Vancouver to Bali, from Bali to Makassar, and from Makassar to Sorong, the gateway to Raja Ampat. An overnight in Makassar, formerly Ujung Pandang, proved to be an authentic cultural experience. My husband ventured out to get a haircut, which cost US\$3, including the cab fare there and back from our hotel. We stayed at the Imperial Aryaduta Hotel Makassar for US\$140 per night. It is the best hotel there, run with Western standards. Allow 45 mins to and from the airport into Makassar.

Sorong is even more rural and we were happy to see the *Seven Seas* crew at the arrivals gate. The *Seven Seas* is a luxurious 33m traditionally built Buginese schooner. It can take 16 divers comfortably. Three speedy skiffs deliver the divers to the dive sites. The gracious Indonesian crew takes care of you as if you were staying at their home. The lovely Yofin, whom everyone calls "Yoyo," took care of us during meals, serving delicious Indonesian and Western cuisine. She is also the massage therapist on board.

There were 10 of us on this charter — three Canadians and seven Americans. There was also an overabundance of crew, and it seemed very professional of the owners not to have cut the staff down based on the smaller number of divers. The cabins are well appointed and very comfy.

The dive director on board was our old friend Stew Esposito, past captain of the *Palau Aggressor* as well as the *Truk Odyssey* liveaboard in Truk Lagoon. The other divemaster, Tommy, can spot a pygmy seahorse half the size of your fingernail from 10 feet.

Esposito has what most would consider a charmed life. He runs his own pool business in North Carolina from spring to late summer, and then he gets to dive in Raja Ampat and the Banda Sea from fall to early spring. A short vacation for him in between dive charters is a weekend in Bali, not a bad gig.

Our check-out dive was at a site called Tanjung Evann. It was a gentle sloping site to about 20m, with a very slight current. The coral, although scattered, was relatively healthy. We immediately saw a very good-sized crocodile fish, several anemones, a rare tiger cowry, nudibranchs and sea stars. The latter part of the dive was at 5-6m. The water was a balmy 86°C, and this dive suggested we would be exploring an underwater fantasy world for the next 10 days.

Some of the many sites we visited were: Kri Point, Sardine Reef, Gam, Manta Point (between Mansaur & Gam islands), Yanggefo, Uraine, Magic Rock, Magic Carpet, Pearl Farm Pier at Wagieo Island, Keruo Island, Melissa's Garden at the Fam Islands, Farondi's Cave at Farondi Island, Anchorage Reef, Barbecue Reef between Karawapop and Kalig islands, Barracuda Reef at Wayil Island, Boo at Boo Island, Fiabacet, which is a site at an island of the same name near Misool, Pulau Wayib, and Shadow Reef.

My favourite site was Fiabacet, where we encountered mantas and mobulas, a huge bait ball, thousands of anthias, and schools of blue-striped yellow snappers. Razorback near Wagmab Island was also a favorite, with crocodile fish, mantis shrimp, stingrays, pygmy seahorses, and red anemones.

The Pearl Farm at night was also a great surprise where we saw the rare wobbegong shark, cuttlefish, and baby sea snakes. At Gam, we saw our first of three Raja Ampat epaulette sharks, a walking shark species only found in these waters.

The *Seven Seas* liveaboard ([www.thesevenseas.net](http://www.thesevenseas.net)) also does charters to Komodo, Wakatobi, Alor, and the Banda Sea. An eight-night charter costs US\$2,616, not including nitrox, port clearance, conservation fees and fuel surcharges.

To get to Raja Ampat, the best routing is to get to Jakarta, Bali or Singapore. Then the *Seven Seas* office can assist you with booking travel to Sorong. In order to board the *Seven Seas*, arrive in Jakarta no later than the day prior to boarding. To route through Bali, you need to



arrive in Bali a minimum of two days prior to boarding. There is an additional overnight in Makassar in order to connect with a flight to Sorong the next day to get aboard the liveaboard.

If you fly via Jakarta, you overnight in the Indonesian capital and then take a morning flight to Makassar and then to Sorong. From Bali, you need to fly to Makassar and overnight there before taking a flight to Sorong the



## Best of Bali

There are many inexpensive and reasonable hotels in Bali. In Kuta and Sanur, you can find a room for US\$25 per night. Seminyak is where many expats reside and has some fashionable upscale hotels. Our favourite is La Lucciola, a gorgeous beachfront setting where you can savour Italian cuisine with Bali's elite.

If you want to splurge a little, stay in Bali for a few days at the luxurious Four Seasons Resort Bali at Jimbaran Bay. The general manager, John O'Sullivan, ensures a top notch operation and gracious staff. Rates start at US\$680 per night ([www.fourseasons.com/jimbaranbay/](http://www.fourseasons.com/jimbaranbay/)).

All accommodations are private, very spacious villas, with ocean views and a private plunge pool.

If you stay three nights in Bali, you can dive the *Liberty* wreck in Tulamben, Bali's most famous dive. It is an all-day excursion to drive to Tulamben, have two dives and get back to your hotel in the evening.

You dive straight from the beach to the wreck, just offshore, and can see tropical fish everywhere including scorpion fish, sweetlips, snappers, octopus and blue-spotted rays. The *Liberty* is an easy dive and a good snorkelling site.

The other novelty dive is Nusa Penida, where you can see the rare mola mola, particularly during August. Dive operators offer day trips from Bali.

There are plenty of dive operators in Bali. Depending on the distance, most dive shops start around US\$90 per day for two dives. We enjoyed diving with Bali International Diving Professionals.

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next day. From Singapore, you can connect to Jakarta or Bali, or also fly to Manado and then Sorong, which means you can make a side trip to dive on Sulawesi. But flights to and from Manado during the months of December and January are unreliable due to weather, so it is a good idea




Photos by Tony Hepburn

to get to Sorong one day early. Sorong, however, can be a challenging place to overnight.

We live in Vancouver, Canada, meaning we need to fly from either Vancouver or Los Angeles to either Bali or Jakarta, via Singapore. We chose to fly Singapore Airlines. The cost ranges from US\$1,700 to US\$2,600.

China Air offers flights from Vancouver to Bali or Jakarta, connecting in Taipei, starting at US\$1,088. Korean Air flies via Seoul for fares starting at US\$1,600. Japan Airlines offers flights from Vancouver to Bali from US\$1,200.

The cost for round-trip domestic flights from Jakarta to Sorong is around US\$590. Bali to Sorong return is around US\$570 via Xpress Air. This airline will actually feed you a chicken meal and fragrant jasmine tea on their domestic flights – quite a difference compared with U.S. airlines nowadays. Our group used the Sheraton Airport Hotel in Jakarta for the one night layover in each direction and the approximate cost is US\$135 per night, with two people sharing. Please bear in mind that all these prices are approximate and can change at short notice. 

**T**he Philippines and its more than 7,000 islands are still relatively underrated as a dive destination. But it offers world-class diving, beautiful resorts, white sand beaches, and friendly people. After a day of blowing bubbles, enjoy good food, gracious hospitality and a bottle of the famous San Miguel beer. The Philippine culture is a blend of Malay, Madrid and Manhattan.

There's plenty of diving around the country, from Puerto Galera near Manila to the remote Tubbataha Reefs to the south.

Here are some of the best deals.

Atlantis Resort in Puerto Galera offers seven nights accommodation with meals, transfers and six days of diving for US\$1,310, in low season.

Atlantis Resort in Dumaguete offers seven nights with meals, transfers and six days of diving for US\$1,344 in low season.

Bahura Resort and Spa, in a protected marine sanctuary in Dumaguete, offers seven nights with meals, transfers and six dive days for US\$1,850.

The Stella Maris Explorer liveaboard offers liveaboards to Apo Reef, Coron or Tubbataha for US\$1,445 for five nights. The domestic flight from Manila to reach the Stella Maris is around US\$160.

Pacific Dive and Travel offers a package with five nights on the Stella Maris in a deluxe cabin and five nights at Bahura Resort on Dumaguete. Contact Lora Clarkson at [www.pacificdiveandtravel.com](http://www.pacificdiveandtravel.com).

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Photos by choongmin63, istockphoto.com