



Raja Ampat Revisited, December 2016

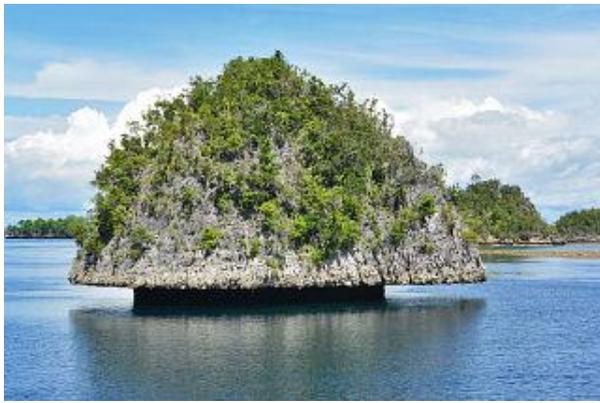
Trip Report & photos by Jayne Jenkins.

This was my fourth trip on the Seven Seas and second to Raja Ampat. And when returning to an area that has stood out as probably one of my favourite dive destinations it is always with slight hesitation - will it be as good as last time? There was no need for any doubt as this was, yet again an amazing trip.

Raja Ampat described as "the heart of the coral triangle" really lives up to its name. The marine ecosystems are striving to survive thanks to it being a Marine Protected Area. The local government with support of international NGOs such as The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International, a number of eco-resorts and live-aboard vessels in Raja Ampat are all working together to keep this area well preserved.



What I love about this area is, above water it is almost unbelievable, the lush beauty of the islands themselves, countless mushroom-shaped islets set in clear blue waters adorned with pitcher plants and orchids. Then underwater, Raja Ampat is a maze of endless colourful corals and marine life. Each dive never disappoints whether it be macro or wide angle. The variety of pygmy sea horses and blennies, the numerous turtles, the triggerfish, stunning overhangs, dense soft corals and myriads of small and large fish.



Some of the highlights for me were the up close and personal encounters with oceanic manta rays. Majestic mantas' repeatedly passing within touching distance allowing eyeball-to-eyeball encounters, mind images that stays with you for life. A dozen or so mantas as they circled through cleaning stations, effortless way they can hover and as wrasse clean parasites from giant open maws. Unfortunately we have time frames underwater, as it was very hard leaving to surface.

Watching the juvenile batfish was another first and highlight. This small little creature that is unique with its amazing black body and bright orange border. Swimming with an exaggerated motion this little fish never stays still. And I also could have spent hour's snorkelling in the blue water mangroves - so different to the corals.



Seven Seas cruises include lots of boat rides in and around the islands during surface intervals and some great shore excursions to villages. One on the biggest land thrills of the trip was a very early morning trek (04:30 wake-up) to the top of a ridge to watch the birds of paradise and their mating displays. Quietly hiding in the dense bush near the tree that they seem to meet on for their early morning performance, we were lucky and experienced up to 11 birds. Their colours and dance routine was worth every muscle aching step. You do need binoculars to see the birds but the boat had some excellent ones.



Another great smaller trek was to the lookout at the conservation and tourist area in Piayanemo Karst which also advises on the local sign "decrepit please do not climb to the top", happy to say I am not yet "decrepit"!

Although the destination is one of the best in the world I cannot forget the crew and fellow passengers who played a huge role in making this one of the best diving trips ever. A big big thank you to Captain Wahyu and all his crewmembers for keeping us safe, well looked after, well fed and happy and to the dive team Dedy and Jeffrey who looked great in their Santa hats. Last but not least, Karl for all his patience, enthusiasm and endless chatter and entertainment underwater.

Will I be back? Yes with no hesitation.

Jayne Jenkins,
December 2016

