

# Expand Your Horizons

Indonesia is so much more than Bali and Bintangs: **DUNCAN MADDEN** sets sail for remote Raja Ampat aboard one of the most luxurious charter yachts in the world – the Prana by Atzaro



◀ EPIC SAIL: At 900sq m, Prana by Atzaro is the world's largest phinisi yacht, and comes complete with a spa and an outdoor cinema.

**EMERGING BLEARY EYED** from the cossetting luxury of my cabin to the still dark skies of Raja Ampat in search of mating birds of paradise is a pretty bewildering way to start the day.

Inky black skies are fringed by the soft light of a new dawn and drenched in the kind of heavy morning heat that only proper tropical climates can conjure. The soundtrack is a rhythmic slap of salt water against wooden hull troubled periodically by the caw of an unseen bird swooping through the dark nearby.

My jetlagged senses struggle to align these physical sensations with the time of day and I vaguely recall the journey that brought me to this remotest of oceans on the other side of the world. Somewhere in the back of my befuddled brain I already know this is going to be special.

And it is quite the journey to reach Raja Ampat. Part of Indonesia's far-flung island chains, its pellucid blue waters fringe the Bird's Head peninsula on the north-western tip of Papua nearly 2,000 miles east of Jakarta. Interrupting the 15,000sq mile turquoise seascape are 1,500 picture-postcard islands – mushroom-shaped outcroppings endowed with flawless white beaches, rich tropical forests, rocky precipitous cliffs and glass-still lagoons teeming with more marine life than anywhere else on earth.

Navigating these sublime waters is my home for the week, the *Prana by Atzaro*. Built and launched last year by the group behind Ibiza's famed Atzaró hotel, it is the world's largest phinisi yacht – a floating teak and ironwood palace serving up 900sq m of cabin, deck, spa, lounge and water sports centre to its lucky guests. It was inspired by and built using the traditions of the sea-faring Bugis tribe – a two-masted cargo ketch elevated to something unique by the best craftsmen and every possible mod con.

Climb aboard its sleek wooden deck and (once you've despatched with the ice-cold juice you're duly proffered by the smiling, barefoot crew) you'll find nine luxurious suites, from cosy arrowhead shaped cabins in the prow to Batavia, the vast master suite at the stern complete with freestanding bath and floor to ceiling windows opening onto a sweeping private terrace.

Outside decks climb over three levels

peppered with deep, comfy cushions, inviting daybeds and lounging areas cleverly arranged to offer peace, quiet and room to sprawl. The top deck doubles as a yoga space and open-air cinema, the middle as an outdoor spa and massage area, the lower as an al fresco dining room. But the pick of the spots has to be on the elegant wooden bowsprit, where I regularly find myself stretched out watching the water fly past below me: a petrel skimming the waves on my wingtips.

After our early morning Saporkren adventure to intrude on the randy birds of paradise, we set sail through silky waters to Kri. Soon dropping anchor not far from the wooden jetty of Yembuba village, we don scuba gear and motor towards it on a RIB while our cruise director Cedric, an affable Frenchman who's been exploring these waters for a decade, describes the wonders we're about to dive into.

His words can't begin to do it justice. We slip into an aquatic wonderland barely five metres below the surface, drifting through coral forests as vast shoals of fusilier fish swoop around us in a spectacular underwater murmuration. I spy a leatherback turtle ▶





▼ ON THE ROCKS: Raja Ampat is made up of 1,500 islands.; ► [top to bottom] all hands on deck; showstopping underwater scenes.



► gliding easily along the seabed before Cedric points out a black tip reef shark cruising lazily at the fringes of our visibility. The coral almost glows – a panoply of colours, shapes and textures each home to a new and seemingly more fantastical form of sea life. An hour passes in a moment and soon back on deck we excitedly swap stories of what we saw as the crew weighs anchor and points us towards Wayag.

Special, even in this extraordinary environment, the conical karst islands of Wayag can only be appreciated in all their wonder from on high. So, at first light, fuelled on exotic fruits and strong coffee, we paddleboard to shore and spend a sweaty

few hours climbing the craggy limestone Mount Pindito to drink in the panorama.

The spectacular views are reward enough, but the crew are keen to show off every wonder Wayag has to offer. Which is why, after a gluttonous beach barbecue of lobster, steak, fish, fresh salads and a particularly delicious chimichurri, I find myself speeding through empty lagoons, trying to remember how to wakeboard while whooping and screaming in equal measure delight and awe. Later, we putter out to a nearby ranger station and wade into the shallows to handfeed lunch leftovers to hungry nursing sharks.

Back onboard, we head south for Aljui Bay, crossing the equator late in the day while feasting on more delights from chef Fauzi before retiring to the top deck to watch a Wes Anderson film under the stars, the setting adding another layer of surrealness to the weird and wonderful on-screen visuals.

For the first time another yacht appears in the dark and sails close by, but by now we're so accustomed to the solitude of our surroundings that we take on a pirate mentality and wave them away, wielding champagne flutes rather than cutlasses.

Cedric saves something special for the last, as we begin the run back to Sorong on the Papuan mainland and the long flights home. Close to Batanta Island, we dive a spot called Melissa's Garden – a broad sweeping reef of magnificent coral formations teeming with spiky lionfish, striped angelfish, pygmy seahorses, ribboned sweetlips and the ubiquitous clownfish. A fellow diver even spots a tasselled wobbegong shark but I'm too busy goggling eye to eye with a sizeable batfish and miss it.

We lounge on deck late into our final night, supping cold Bintangs and listening to stories of Raja Ampat and beyond. "We've just given you a taste of where we sail – this is only the winter season," says Cedric. "Come back in the summer and we'll take you to Komodo with its beautiful landscapes, pink beaches and, of course, dragons..." I hear the diving's pretty spectacular, too. **H**

*To find out more about sailing Raja Ampat on board Prana by Atzaro email [info@pranabyatzaro.com](mailto:info@pranabyatzaro.com) or see [pranabyatzaro.com](http://pranabyatzaro.com). Full private charter costs from \$12,500 to \$18,000 per night sleeping up to 18 people with all meals, a range of wines and alcohol, all water sports and lots of other stuff included.*

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