

the essence of Raja Ampat

: SHANNON CONWAY

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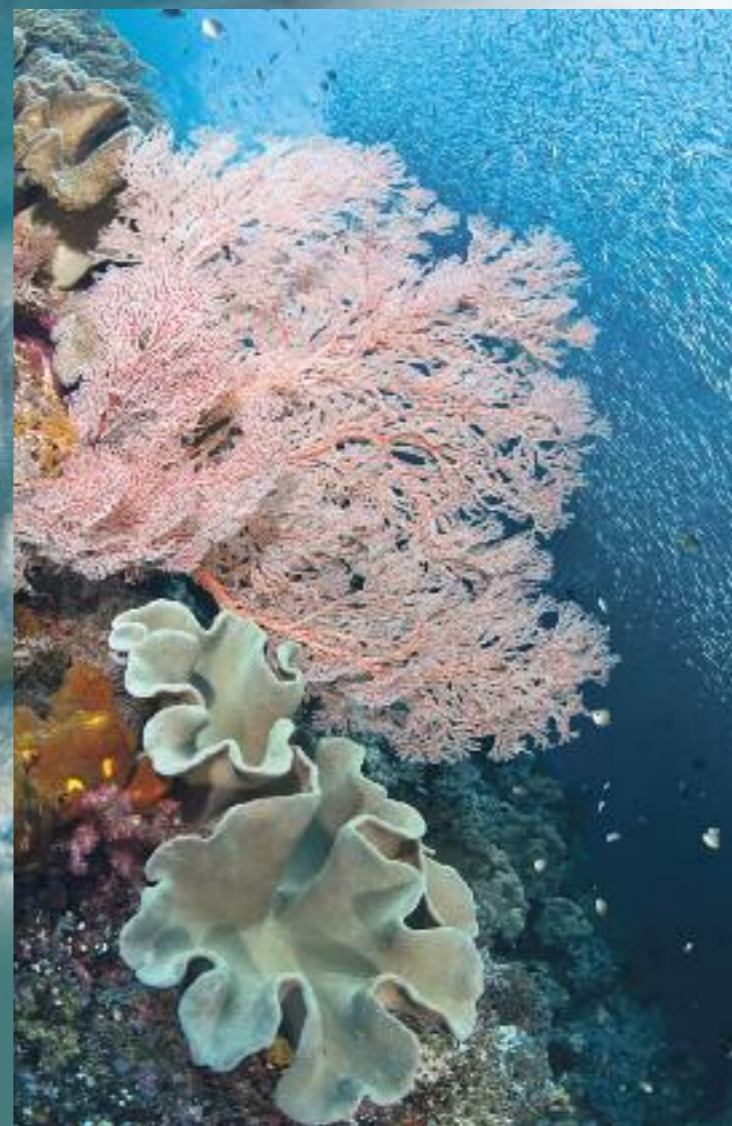
> THE BIO DIVERSITY HERE CAN BE FOUND NO WHERE ELSE ON THE PLANET. LOCATED AT THE HEART OF THE CORAL TRIANGLE IS RAJA AMPAT, A LABYRINTH OF SOME 1500 ISLANDS, CAYS AND SHOALS. I'VE BEEN ASKED MANY TIMES "WHERE IS YOUR FAVOURITE PLACE TO DIVE?" NOW I HAVE MY ANSWER!

The Raja Ampat, or Four Kings, archipelago covers more than 40,000 square kilometres off the northwest tip of the recently-named West Papua province of Indonesia, formerly known as Irian Jaya. The main four islands are Salawati, Waigeo, Batanta and in the south, Misool. It holds the record for the richest variety of species in the world.

Getting to Misool is an experience in itself. From Perth it took four hours on Jetstar to Jakarta with an overnight stop there. Then two hours on Express Air into Makassar, a 20 minute break, then a two-hour flight to Sarong, West Papua, the gateway to Raja Ampat. After overnighing in Sarong, we took a a four-hour, 30-knot speedboat trip to Misool Eco Resort, our base for 10 days.

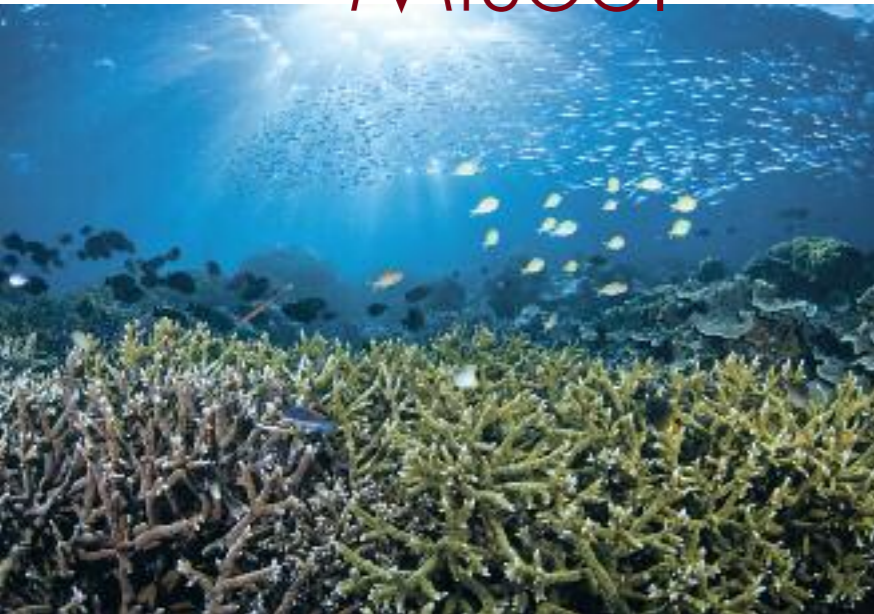
The resort, on the uninhabited island of Batbitim, was created using salvaged driftwood and free-fallen timber by German Master Carpenter Thorben Niemann. I spent an hour or two speaking to this amazing man about how he'd accomplished this stunning feat. Thorben, originally from Geesthacht, 35kms southeast of Hamburg, left his hometown in 1988 at age 25 to fulfil his 'Wauerschaff' (take a journey, unable to return for a minimum 3 years and 1 day). As part of his Master Carpenter apprenticeship he had to travel using his skills as a carpenter in exchange for food, accommodation and minimal payment. This journey, as I understand it, consists of the first year in a German speaking country, the second in Europe and the third anywhere in the world. The latter took him to Ipoh (Malaysia), Koh Samui (Thailand), finishing in Koh Tao maintaining a dive boat at Big Bubble Dive Centre where he met Mika the owner.

In 2001-2 Thorben returned to Geesthacht to complete his Master Carpenters exam, but finding it difficult to settle, he returned to Koh Tao in 2003, where he worked with Mika for the next two seasons. Through Mika, Thorben met Andrew Miners whose dream was to create an eco-dive resort in one of the most pristine dive locations in the world, Raja Ampat. Andrew's idea of building an eco resort on Batbitim interested Thorben. He could use his carpentry, design and building skills to their full potential. The idea of building a resort on an island in the middle of nowhere seemed crazy just from the logistics point of view. This was a challenge not to be taken lightly. Andrew first had to secure permission from the locals to build on Babitim and convince the local village heads (Kepala desa) at Yellu Village Misool. After many meetings and negotiations he managed



Main: Bigeye scad.
Far left: A red & white spotted pygmy seahorse *Hippocampus denise*. The species can be quite varied in colouring.
Left: A pair of 'plucked chicken' pygmy seahorses.
Above: Coral surrounded by bait fish at Whale Rock.





the seemingly impossible – a lease for the island and a 200 square kilometre no-take fishing zone around Batbitim. The locals understood the benefits of no-take zones and had used these practises (*sasi*) in the past. The no-take zone was also quite a distance from the local fishing village. The locals would also have employment opportunities to complement the local pearl farming industry.

After sourcing tools and materials from Sorong and Makassar, Thorben and five workers from Yellu set up camp on Batbitim and began the arduous task of clearing the land to commence construction. Work began in the summer of 2006. Andrew is still in regular dialog with the people of Yellu, employing many people from the village and negotiating larger no-take zones. They hope to have an expanded protected reef area four times the size of Singapore by year's end.

My first dive was the House Reef. For once I didn't take my camera – I wanted to get a feel for the area other than through a



viewfinder. A giant stride off the main jetty with Javanese Instructor and guide Sangut Santosa and within 10 metres we had an inquisitive giant barracuda. Looking ahead at this stunning reef I knew this would be no ordinary dive. Six pygmy seahorses (*hippocampus denise*), seven different nudibranch species, a balled-up blue anemone, stunning hard and soft corals. Is this the best house reef anywhere? This was going to be a great trip!

You could spend a month here just exploring the known dive sites let alone those left to discover. The list is so big I couldn't dive them all in 10 days!

Boo Two rock islands running north to south encrusted with hard and soft corals. Sharply sloping to the sea at 20-25 metres. No space for dead or damaged corals here! Between the two islands is an 8-10 metre deep gully running east-west with enormous seafans on both sides. The highlight for me was an area northwest of the gully called The Windows. The surface crashes through the top of these window arches creating a constant pounding noise which can be felt through your whole body. The fish life is outstanding with jacks and dogtooth tuna feeding in the surge and schooling bannerfish sitting behind seafans catching tiny morsels floating by in the current. Diving through the eight-metre arch is like swimming in sparkling wine as it's forced out the neck of a bottle.

Whale Rock This rocky island, some 10 minutes north by dive boat, can be seen from the resort. It looks like a surfaced

sperm whale from a cartoon – all you're waiting for is the comical fountain of water from the breather hole. The corals and fish life are stunning, as with every other site I dived. Here with my wife Amanda and Sangut, our objective was to find the elusive red *Hippocampus denise*. An hour later after checking probably 20+ fans of the correct genus Amanda found one. Of course we had current and the little fella was near the outside edge of the fan swaying back and forth in the current. A couple of images completed another fantastic dive.

Camel Rock A 'three-humped camel' from the dive brief, the third being it's head I think. Three small reefs rising from 20 metres running east-west reaching to three metres are festooned with stunning fans, some three metres high. Bommies and small caves are crammed full of glassfish with coral trout, barramundi and oriental sweetlips. The regular visit of large Napoleon wrasse, black and white tip reef sharks reminds you of the health of these stunning reefs. On one seafan Amanda counted 21 pygmy seahorses.

Fiabacet Fairly swift currents from the north only enhanced the spectacle. I chose to just sit in the blue watching the pot-boiling performance. Anchovies by the million screamed back and forth, chased by Jacks, tuna and mobula Rays. I tried in vain to photograph the mobula rays, but there was just too many fish in the way so I just sat back and enjoyed the show. It was like the BBC documentary *Blue Planet* on steroids. You have to remember

Clockwise from bottom left: Soft corals, hard corals, sponges and bait fish layering the slopes of Boo; Misool House Reef as the evening sun gets ready to set; Fantastic communal camera preparation facilities within the dive centre; Gorgonian Passage where sea fans nearly break the surface; The bridge crossing to the enormous and superbly equipped dive centre.

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sometimes to just enjoy the experience. The reef was as stunning as all the others.

Gorgonian Passage About 45 minutes boat ride from the resort, this is a stunning site for wide angle photography. A long gully stretches between the two islands; under the rock overhangs were red, yellow, and pink seafans almost breaking the surface at low tide. I'd have liked to have spent more time here but this will be left for my next trip to the area.

My favourite site? Well that's difficult but as a photographer, the house reef itself, which includes several accessible sites, takes some beating. There's unlimited access between 6am and 9pm. There's the sloping wall dive between the jetty which bottoms out at 25 metres and the lagoon with the water bungalow accommodation.

Log your name on the dive board, jump off the dive platform at the jetty and spend as long as you like diving the gradually sloping wall. It's hard to know what camera lens to choose.

The site is also superb for macro or wide angle – you could spend a whole dive just under the jetty with the shoaling Jacks, enormous seafans and soft corals. Diving north along the reef there's more seafans and soft corals as far as you can see. Take a closer look at the reef and even an untrained eye will find orangutan and porcelain crabs, nudibranchs and longnose hawkfish, whilst behind you in the channel are eagle rays flying in formation, plus Napoleon wrasse. It's like Lembah sprinkled over an untouched coral reef. Approaching the corner of the lagoon where there are pristine table

corals in two metres of water, a shoal of anchovies dart back and forth avoiding the awaiting jacks and coral trout. You finish your dive in the lagoon at two to four metres depending on the tide. Here you'll find bumphead parrotfish, enormous shoals of sardines, anemone fish and batfish right under the water bungalows.

Take a dive across the 25-metre deep channel directly east from the jetty and you'll encounter several inquisitive and enormous cod drifting down the light current, waiting in anticipation of an easy meal. Within a few minutes the wall of the reef comes into focus, with soft and hard corals reaching virtually to the surface. As with the resort side, there's a myriad of colour with hard corals stretching virtually to the small beach tide line. This is a great area for taking split level shots in the



Thorben at breakfast with the resident friendly wild pigeon.



afternoon sun. Heading south along the reef at eight metres, a cave comes into view; a quick look and several photographs later I made a mental note to return with my wife to model.

I'll be returning to Misool Eco Resort in the not too distant future. It will be interesting to see how this virtually untouched eco system has fared. Thorben tells me the fish life has improved immensely since they first secured the no-take zone. Can this wonderland for divers get any better?



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CONSTRUCTION OF AN ECO RESORT



Misool Eco Resort is committed to a policy of environmental and social responsibility. It aims to provide exceptional and enriching experiences in a sustainable environment, and to protect and revitalise both the natural surroundings and the community in which it operates. With this in mind, the resort has engineered all its structures to be as low impact as possible, both during building and operation. With the help of local craftsman, and resident master carpenter Thorben Niemann, Misool Eco Resort employs a number of techniques to construct sustainable and beautiful buildings:

- All wood used to build the resort is salvaged hardwoods. The team has excavated driftwood buried under beach sand, and then milled every single piece by hand in the resorts portable saw mill.
- This wood has been purchased directly from the local people rather than logging conglomerates.
- Most of the fine carpentry work is done locally and the resort supplies the carpenters with eco-lumber.
- The pier has been constructed with salvaged 22-inch metal pipe.
- Cottages use natural thatch roofing that is locally made.
- Walls are insulated with coconut fibres and treated with borax, a natural termite deterrent.

