

# Another Day In Paradise

Sailing through the azure waters of eastern Indonesia, Nigel Tisdall discovers a little piece of heaven



“The chart is dotted with islands sporting minimal names like Fee, Fi, Fo and Fum”

Survey the ever-changing scenery from the sundeck

Tiger Blue sets sail from the islands of Raja Ampat



If it's Thursday, it must be the Pai Islands

SPREADING ACROSS THE Pacific from the Philippines to Bali and the Solomon Islands, the Coral Triangle is the richest marine environment in the world. Its vast oceans are so alive with vivid corals and extraordinary fish that scientists have dubbed it a ‘species factory’.

Its centrepiece is a remote corner of eastern Indonesia known as Raja Ampat, and although such places sound pretty far-flung, the world is now so connected we can shoot off even here for a dreamy holiday with ridiculous ease. And let's face it, leaving ‘Sorry, I'm in the Spice Islands’ on voicemail brings a delicious sense that, for a brief moment, one might actually be getting life's priorities right.

That's why I'm jetting over the Seram Sea to Sorong, having already boinged down to Dubai, then on to Jakarta, then to Makassar. The port sits on the western tip of New Guinea, the second largest island in the world. From the air, it looks so

wild and thickly forested it is easy to believe it's still home to remote tribes who have never heard of Simon Cowell.

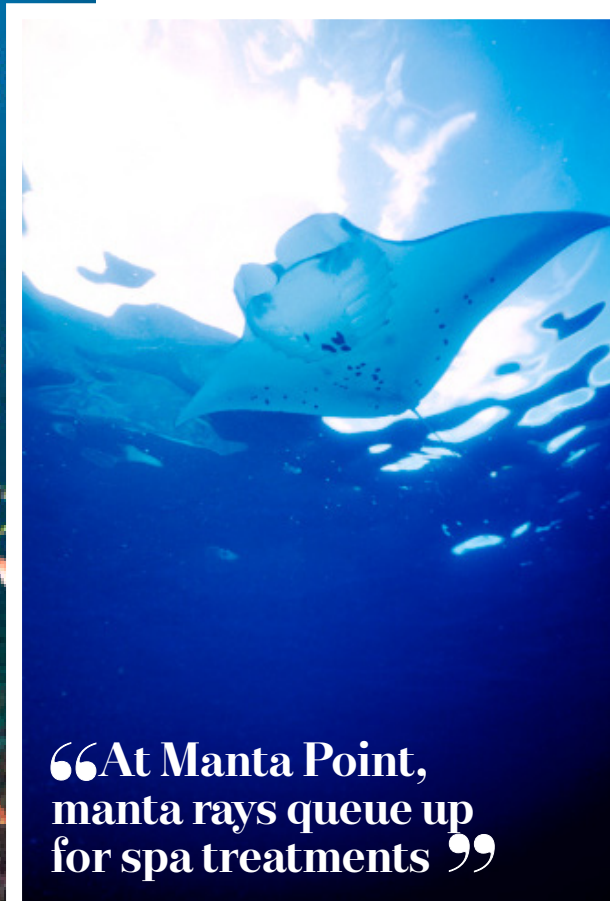
The baking-hot, mosquito-ridden airport might better be called ‘So Wrong’ – but its mix of local faces is fascinating. This is an island caught between Asia and Australia, where slim Javanese mingle with stocky Papuans and the wildlife is completely different from the rest of Indonesia. Thankfully, I'm heading straight out to sea, but it's a surprise to find the harbour dotted with some 20 liveaboard boats offering holidays sailing the turquoise waters of Raja Ampat. This sweet spot is fast becoming a hot spot, and there's even a few resorts where you can fly in to dive and turn your back on the world for a few days.

It's much better to sail around, though, taking a go-where-you-please voyage aboard a glamorous wooden schooner such as Tiger Blue, a 34-metre traditional phinisi with billowing red sails and robust teak fittings. Its solid en-suite cabins can accommodate ten passengers, although most of us prefer to sleep on deck, enjoying the balmy breezes as we cruise beneath a night sky peppered with stars. Our skipper and dive-master is Dutch while the eight-strong, all male Indonesian {continued}

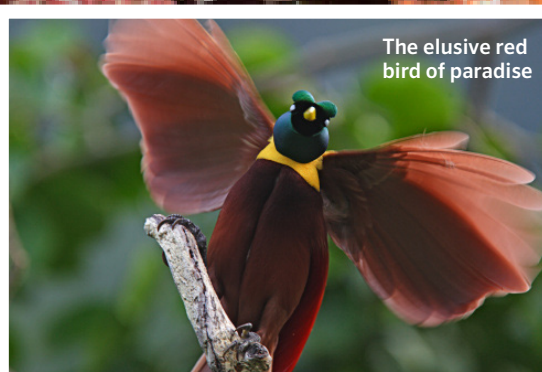




Raja Ampat is home to three quarters of the world's coral species



“At Manta Point, manta rays queue up for spa treatments”



The elusive red bird of paradise

crew are so cheery I wonder if they're participating in a secret smileathon. By nightfall, we've taught them how to mix knockout caipirinhas using local limes brought to our boat by enterprising vendors in wooden pirogues. Trading with them makes you feel like Captain Cook. A bag of 20 costs 30p and when I explain that back home we can pay that for just one, the crew erupts into hysterics.

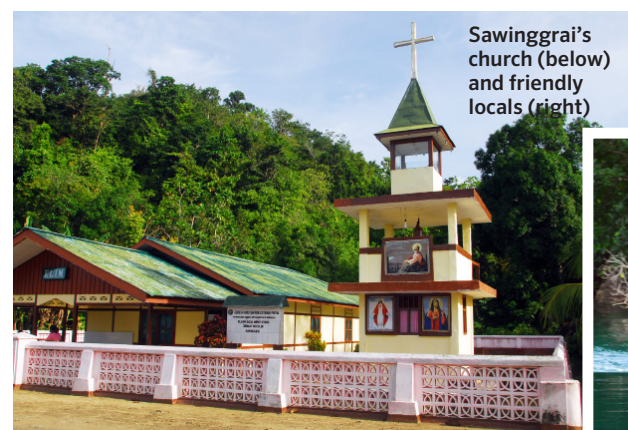
Our chef is from Belgium and will cook anything guests fancy, but we request to have only Asian dishes, including Indonesian favourites like *otak-otak* (fish cakes) and *gado gado* (vegetables with peanut sauce). The menu is supplemented by a cavalcade of

splendid fish caught off the back of the boat as we sail along. Silvery tuna, mighty wahoo – sometimes it's a fight to land them. Once you taste that energising buzz of ultra-fresh sashimi, you feel a step closer to heaven.

‘Where are we heading, cap'n?’ I ask. He pulls out a maritime chart dotted with islands sporting minimalist names like Fee, Fi, Fo and Fum. We are crossing the Dampier Strait, named after the English explorer who passed by in 1699 – back then, sailing here was the equivalent of going to the moon. To the west, across the Halmahera Sea, lie the sultanates of Ternate and Tidore where cloves come from. To the south, the Banda Islands, which can be visited on another Tiger Blue voyage, is where the world fell in love with nutmeg.

One thing is certain, we're unlikely to see another vessel for the whole week. We'll also be totally adrift from the world – no phone signal, no mounting inbox, no Twitter. Nature will provide our news, for these nutrient-rich waters are bursting with life. Raja Ampat is home to 1,200 species of fish and nearly 600 of coral – 75 per cent of the world's total. A few years ago, scientists even found a shark that had evolved to ‘walk’ along reefs on its fins.

Early naturalists came here searching for the red bird of paradise, a {continued}



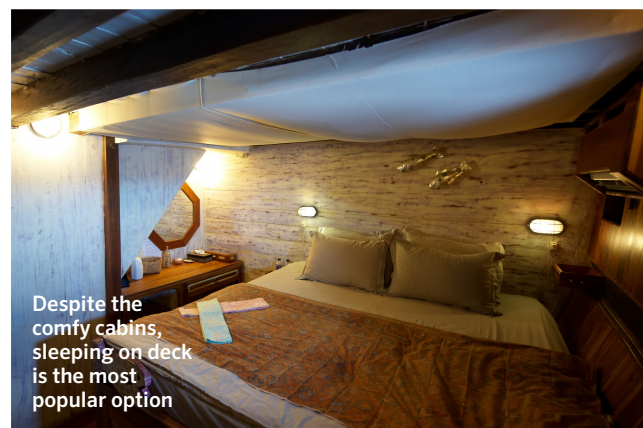
Sawinggrai's church (below) and friendly locals (right)



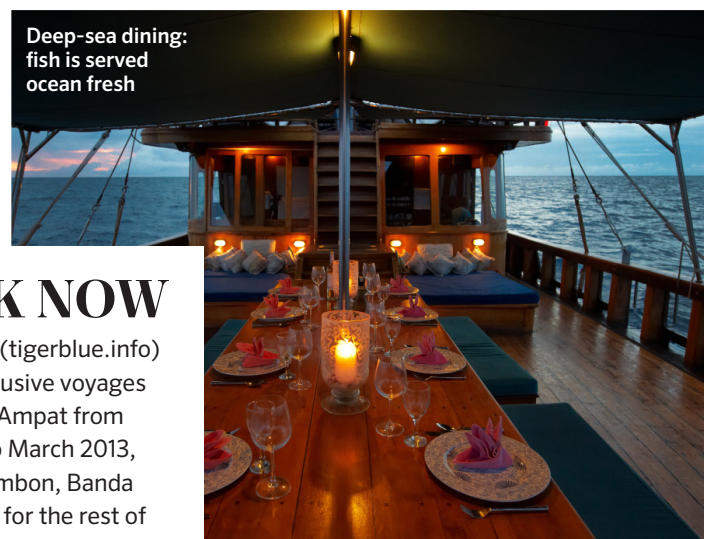




With no other boats around, it's easy to feel totally adrift from the world



Despite the comfy cabins, sleeping on deck is the most popular option



Deep-sea dining: fish is served ocean fresh

flamboyant fashionista of the trees. The males have gorgeous red tail feathers with two long wispy curls that became prized adornments on the hats of Victorian ladies. They are famous for their elaborate, early morning mating rituals staged on specially chosen display trees. We stop off at Sawinggrai to see this, climbing up into the wooded hills with a local guide sporting the traditional Papuan dress of football shirt and flip-flops.

As celebrity PRs would put it, these avian superstars are 'expected to attend'. We sit amid the trees staring up hopefully. A leaf drops. A stomach whirrs – why does the best sightseeing always happen before breakfast? In fact it's a no-show, but that's how it goes in the wild – if you want nature on a plate, go to a zoo. The money from our visit will help this isolated community of 60 families, and it is interesting to see village life with its sweet little church, wandering geese and overwater thatched huts.

Back aboard Tiger Blue, a feast of papaya, melon and mango awaits, and – 'Oh, go on then' – bacon sarnies. Next stop is Manta Point, home to an extraordinary underwater cleaning station where manta rays queue up for spa treatments. Yes, really. These massive black stealth bombers, which have a huge Mick Jagger cartoon mouth and a wingspan of up to five metres, love to have an exfoliating nibble by teams of

attendant wrasse. And whether you snorkel or dive (all equipment is provided at no extra cost), you can easily see the action in the clear, warm water.

The joy of sailing at night is that every morning we awake somewhere new – so if it's Thursday, it must be the Pai Islands, which are so small few maps show them. The geography is deceptive. Now we are as far east as the Australian city of Darwin, almost falling off the edge of the planet. Yet there is life here, including green turtles galore, who pop up by the boat waving their flippers. They nest here on deserted white sand beaches patrolled by Conservation International. 'Last year, we were visited by just three ships,' a ranger tells me – such is the great freedom to explore that comes when you holiday on a privately chartered boat.

In the same vein, when we arrive at the Wayag Islands, the most photogenic part of Raja Ampat, we are the only visitors.

## BOOK NOW

■ Tiger Blue ([tigerblue.info](http://tigerblue.info)) offers all-inclusive voyages around Raja Ampat from November to March 2013, then visits Ambon, Banda and Komodo for the rest of the year. A week's private charter, based on ten sharing, costs from £1,738 per person including meals, excursions and diving. Individuals and couples can also join four set departures a year from £1,305.

■ For flight options to Indonesia, see [skyscanner.net](http://skyscanner.net). Ampersand Travel ([ampersandtravel.com](http://ampersandtravel.com)) arranges tailor-made packages. See [alilahotels.com](http://alilahotels.com) for serene stopover hotels in Jakarta and Bali. For more information, get *Indonesia* (£19.99, Lonely Planet).

Here the limestone peaks have been eroded into mushroom-like islands, creating a monumental water garden fringed with white sands and translucent water. The seabed is as brightly coloured as a children's nursery with neon-blue starfish, banana-like sea squirts and great hedgerows of coral. In the evening, our crew set up beanbag seats on the beach, mix up more caipirinhas and light a blazing bonfire of

bamboo that cracks and bangs as the sun sets like a lurid bruise.

Wayag feels so special we elect to visit it twice and climb up to the precarious summit of the 134-metre Mount Pindito for a view over the entire archipelago. The rocks are razor sharp and it is like scaling a mountain of oyster-shells, but it's worth it to see the islands' weird peaks spread out before us like a huge, emerald egg box. Welcome to Raja Ampat, where the back of beyond has never looked so beautiful. ■

Photographs by Getty Images, Nigel Tisdall