



Condé Nast Traveler

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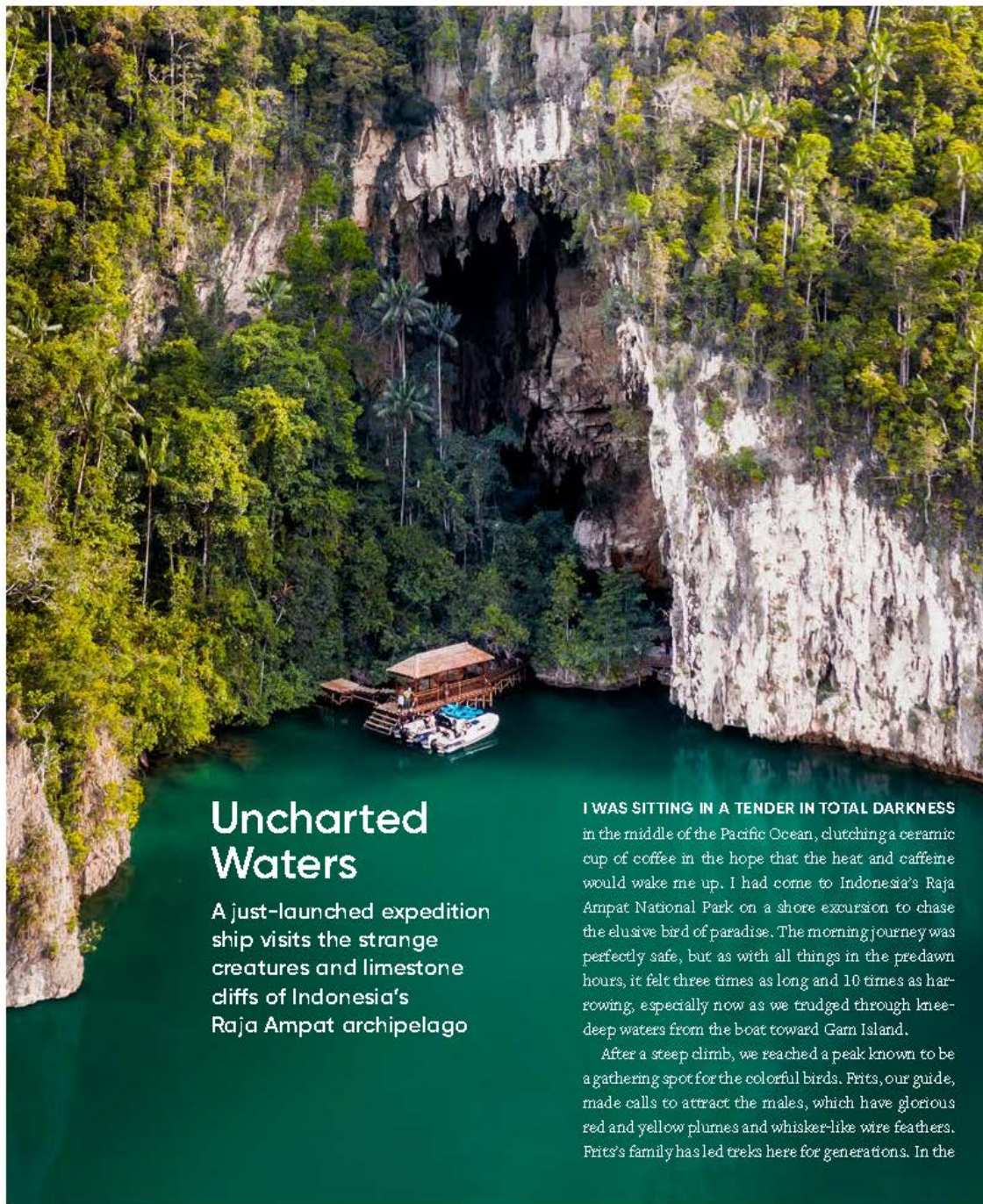
SEE THE WORLD IN A NEW LIGHT

GUATEMALA
RAJA AMPAT
NEW YORK CITY
SOUTH AFRICA
ST. BARTS

+ THE BEST TRIP PLANNERS FOR 2020

why we travel

The experiences that change how we see the world



Uncharted Waters

A just-launched expedition ship visits the strange creatures and limestone cliffs of Indonesia's Raja Ampat archipelago

I WAS SITTING IN A TENDER IN TOTAL DARKNESS

in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, clutching a ceramic cup of coffee in the hope that the heat and caffeine would wake me up. I had come to Indonesia's Raja Ampat National Park on a shore excursion to chase the elusive bird of paradise. The morning journey was perfectly safe, but as with all things in the predawn hours, it felt three times as long and 10 times as harrowing, especially now as we trudged through knee-deep waters from the boat toward Gam Island.

After a steep climb, we reached a peak known to be a gathering spot for the colorful birds. Frits, our guide, made calls to attract the males, which have glorious red and yellow plumes and whisker-like wire feathers. Frits's family has led treks here for generations. In the

PHOTOGRAPH: ANTHONY K. DO/AQUA EXPEDITIONS

The lagoon entry to Talamal Caves, on Raja Ampat's Misool Island

why we travel > *cruise*



19th century, he told me, an ancestor guided Alfred Russel Wallace, the British naturalist who helped shape the theory of natural selection. After an hour or so, I caught my breath as I watched two males fit into sight and land on a branch, making calling sounds and hopping around to show off their feathers. Frits sat back in satisfaction as we took in this peculiar mating dance, which few visitors get to see.

Many visit the Raja Ampat Islands, one of the most biodiverse places in the world, to dive the colorful depths, hoping to spot sharks, manta rays, and seemingly infinite schools of fish. I had come for the inaugural sailing of the *Aqua Blu*, an expedition vessel that its owner, Aqua Expeditions, has billed as the first luxury yacht of its kind in the archipelago. Built in 1968 as a British naval explorer, *Aqua Blu* has gotten a full makeover, with 15 spacious suites spread over four decks. Besides Raja Ampat, the ship now sails regularly from Bali to Komodo National Park and around the Spice Islands. As soon as the other guests and I stepped on board, we took our shoes off, and kept them off for the rest of the journey. The close quarters mean that no one stayed a stranger for long. The tight-knit crew included our British cruise director, Glenn, a former Royal Marine; Kaz, a sought-after, ultra-patient dive master poached from Aman resorts; and Gustin and Refly, rambunctious excursion guides who came with us whenever we left the ship.

Aqua Expeditions is striving to present Raja Ampat in new ways, by sailing to less-visited islands and paying painstaking attention to the food, which puts a fine-dining spin on regional flavors, like nasi goreng, or fried rice, at breakfast and spicy sambal sauce with everything. Each morning I woke up to different scenery—limestone cliffs, palm-lined beaches, fog-shrouded mountains. As a non-diver I had been afraid there wouldn't be enough for me to do. But unlike the typical *phinisi* boats that ply Raja Ampat, *Aqua Blu* is designed for varied interests. On land there were hikes to waterfalls and visits to pearl farms

ABOVE
Searching for birds of paradise on Raja Ampat

RIGHT
Banta Island, a stop on Aqua Blu's Komodo National Park itinerary



and villages. We went snorkeling every day, which felt like watching underwater television: The variety of fish and coral was unbelievable, while the salt water was so buoyant we barely had to swim. Though the guides have spent much of their professional lives in the water, they approached each snorkeling excursion with the enthusiasm of beginners, spotting fish in the depths and showing us how to use the ship's underwater camera.

For the Discover Scuba Diving course, Glenn walked us through the basic techniques before we donned the heavy equipment and got into the water. Gustin, my appointed dive instructor, stayed close, communicating with hand signals to check my ear pressure and make sure I was breathing comfortably, pointing out rare fish species all the while. At one point we spotted a manta ray floating beneath us and I found myself trying to clap in my excitement.

"We always remember our first trips, good or bad," Glenn said on our first evening. It wasn't just my first trip to Raja Ampat, it was also the ship's first time in the area, and the crew's first time sailing there as a team. We didn't realize how prescient Glenn's words would be until near the end, when the ship ran aground on a sea mound near Wayag Island, in the northern part of the archipelago, around lunchtime. From my perch in the lounge, I saw the crew jump into action. Glenn made sure all the passengers were accounted for, while the guides dived to assess the damage. Throughout it all, I felt safe and taken care of by the crew, who never left us wondering what was going on.

It's easy to be overwhelmed by the sights and sounds of Raja Ampat, from the teal-and-orange sunsets to the bird calls surrounding the volcanic islands to the underwater world. So much of the trip was unforgettable, like a daytime swim across the equator. But what I've held onto the most are the moments of calm: stargazing from the chaises, relaxing with the crew on a beach, and reaching that high peak where the birds of paradise sang and danced, welcoming us to their wild, beautiful home. —STEPHANIE WU

Seven-night cruises for all three Aqua Blu Indonesia itineraries from \$7,525 per person in a double-occupancy cabin; aqualexpeditions.com

PHOTOGRAPHS: KEN KOCHER/AQUA EXPEDITIONS, ANTHONY K DO/AQUA EXPEDITIONS