Sailing Indonesia in style

Travel

Cruise the far reaches of the archipelago, dive with manta rays, paddleboard at sunrise or get a massage – the itinerary is yours to map out on ultra-luxe liveaboards there

(Above) Paddleboarding at sunrise. PHOTO: FIORENZO NISI

Get a massage (above) aboard the Prana by Atzaro (left), a high-end phinisi liveaboard hand-built in ironwood and teak that sleeps 18 in nine sumptuous en-suite cabins (right). PHOTOS: PRANA BY ATZARO

An oceanic manta ray in Raja Ampat. PHOTO: MAVIS TEO

Mavis Teo

With more than 17,000 islands, there is much to explore in Indonesia. The catch – most of it can be accessed only by boat.

Travellers seeking to visit the most far-flung parts of the archipelago still want their luxuries, but there, few hotels exist.

In a place where boats are the most logistically feasible means of transport and accommodation, the liveaboard is gaining ground. The term refers to boats with beds and showers that you can stay on.

The non-luxury liveaboard, used by families and scuba divers, usually has no more than 10 cabins and basic facilities.

What is emerging is demand for uber-luxe liveaboards, where rates start at $1,200 a night a person and guests have complete freedom over the itinerary.

There has been a 20 per cent rise year on year in liveaboards in the region and the number is set to continue growing. So says Mr Boumedienne Senous, director of operations at Yacht Sourcing, a boat broking, building and management company headquartered in Bali with offices in Singapore, Jakarta and Labuan Bajo, a fishing town on the island of Flores.

"There's an increased interest in the biodiversity of life in the water and untouched villages on land," says Mr Senous, who notes that the Indonesian government is also doing more to encourage such tourism.

The government is building more facilities for yachts and boats to ply these areas and a marina is being built in Flores, where boats sailing to Komodo island are docked, so vessels can replenish their needs and attend to maintenance works more easily.

"There also talks about the government scrapping the luxury goods tax on foreign pleasure boats coming into Indonesia," adds Madam Fatiyah Suryani Mile, chairman of Jaringan Kapal Rekreasi, an association of liveaboards in Indonesia.

SUNDAY TIMES GRAPHICS

Hike up Mount Pindito in Wayag for a panoramic view of the conical karst islands that have become the poster children of Raja Ampat. PHOTO: FIORENZO NIS

MADE FOR SERIOUS CRUISING

Mr Senous himself is busy answering to the demand for liveaboards and overseeing the construction of three phinisi boats to be delivered over the next two years.

A phinisi is a traditional two-masted boat that was built in Sulawesi and used for spice trading. Boats of this style were popular in the 15th century. Today, it has been adapted for use by travellers, with spaces for cargo now used for cabins.

Travellers on luxury liveaboards have an added advantage – they can dictate the itinerary.

Many want to see a wild landscape with forgotten tribes and endless powdery beaches with secluded coves to swim in. But they want to do it at their own pace and shift the itinerary based on how they feel from day to day.

During breaks from excursions, they want to return to a boat where they are greeted by staff offering snacks such as fresh fruit or watermelon smoothies.

By evening, they want a warm shower and a deep-tissue massage before sitting down to a wine-paired dinner.

And the next day, they want to see the sunrise from a private deck, perhaps even saluting it with a yoga instructor.

Two years ago, Indonesian businessman J. Tanudjaja, 56, chartered a luxury liveaboard that can sleep up to 16 for six days.

The Singapore permanent resident travelled with his extended family, who had gathered to celebrate milestones – his mother was turning 80 and his youngest child was turning 21.

The chartered cruise was ideal for the group as they had varied interests and enjoyed the luxury of being able to do as they pleased.

"In between visiting some villages, my children and their cousins dove and paddleboarded, while the adults just relaxed, chatted and had massages," Mr Tanudjaja says.

"Because we had the boat to ourselves, we could decide where to go and what to do. My wife liked the experience so much we are chartering another boat for our 30th wedding anniversary this year."

Luxury liveaboards such as the Silolona, Arenui and Damai provide these services and more.

Silolona and her sister boat, Si Datu Bua, owned by an American anthropologist, take guests to visit remote tribes such as the Asmat and Dani of Papua.

The Asmat were infamous for headhunting and cannibalism – fortunately, these practices have long been put aside. They are also known for elaborate wood carvings and ceremonies that depict local folklore and legends and hold visitors in thrall.

Liveaboard guests can come from Europe and the United States and these make up a chunk of the bookings, says Mr Philip Gonda, co-owner of Prana by Atzaro, a high-end liveaboard launched in Indonesia in September last year.

But he says 30 per cent of his guests hail from Indonesia and Singapore. Some are divers wanting to explore remote waters, but many others are seeking a trip where they can unplug and relax in the company of family and friends.

THE DARK SIDE TO THE BOOM

There is a downside to all this interest – the environmental impact. But Madam Fatiyah thinks tourism helps imparts the value of protecting the marine parks.

Of these, Raja Ampat is the largest. About 50,000 people live in the area. As more awareness is raised with regard to how protecting the reefs and marine life translates to the tourism dollar, which then improves their lot, locals tend to become more mindful about preserving the pristine waters.

In my experience, locals everywhere tend to be proud of their surrounds and, if given the slightest chance, are happy to become custodians of their environment.

Crew on liveaboards plying these waters are also passionate about preservation and have immense knowledge of where they sail.

Raja Ampat, or The Four Kings, earned its name from four main islands: Misool, Batanta, Salawati and Waigeo. But it is actually composed of 1,500 islands across 75,000 sq km off West Papua in the eastern Indonesian archipelago.

In these waters, you get a confluence of oceans. The deep currents of the Pacific surge into the warmer waters of Raja Ampat, resulting in rich nutrients that draw diverse marine species from the microscopic to large pelagics such as oceanic manta rays and whale sharks.

There is also the Raja Ampat walking shark, which literally walks on the seabed by thrusting its fins forward.

Endemic species of birds and fauna are also found on land. In recent years, non-divers have been drawn by the spectacular sights of lush emerald-covered karsts.

The area is also steeped in history and culture – the Dutch, English and Portuguese came to the area to trade and evangelise in colonial times, giving rise to a curious mix of Christian practices alongside animistic ones in remote villages.

In Raja Ampat, the dive dollar has always been strong. Flight tickets tend to sell out fast during the peak season of December and January. It may then be hard to get seats for large groups for flights from Jakarta to Sorong, where boats leaving for Raja Ampat are docked.

My trip saw me mingling with a group with mixed interests aboard the Prana, a 55m-long phinisi hand-built in ironwood and teak.

With its billowing white sails and white hull with accents of burnished wood, it cast an impressive figure on the water.

The boat sleeps 18 in nine sumptuous en-suite cabins, three of which are above deck. Common areas include the indoor restaurant and living room.

The menu in the restaurant ranges from healthy, including detox juices, to indulgent – think eggs Benedict. In the evenings, a good selection of wines was presented.

In between dips in aquamarine waters under clear blue skies and sunbathing on powdery beaches, we started some mornings with an instructor-led workout. Sometimes, we kayaked or visited local villages.

One afternoon, the crew prepared a rijsttafel (shared table in Dutch) lunch, served on the beach on a beautifully set table with table linen and silver. We ate chilli Papuan crabs, chargrilled chicken in spicy kicap manis and barbecued lobsters with an assortment of sambal.

It was not all lazing and canapes at sunset, though.

One sunrise, we hiked up Mount Pindito in Wayag for panoramas of the conical karst islands that have become the poster children of Raja Ampat.

Mr Cedric Lesenechal, the cruise director, and a few surefooted crew members led this motley group – aged between 26 and 70 with varying fitness levels – up the rocky limestone cliffs. We were rewarded by a view of the karsts with no sight of other boats in the bay.

On another day, we walked through Saprokrem, a village with 300 inhabitants on Waigeo island. Our destination was a forest grove where we watched the courting ritual of the red bird of paradise, a species endemic to Raja Ampat.

And when asked to check out Manta Sandy, a dive site known for manta rays, Mr Lesenechal proved his knowledge of the area.

He noted that it is too populated with other divers now, adding: "We know of another site where you won't see divers from another boat."

And off we sped, having sworn that we would not divulge the name of this site (and would not be able to, anyway, since none of us paid attention to the coordinates).

There, in peaceful surrounds with no other boats, at least five rays gathered to be cleaned of parasites by smaller fish. We stayed near the seabed, not daring to move much lest we spook the majestic creatures swooping over us gracefully.

On another day, during a drift dive at Black Rock, we dropped 30m to an outcrop along the sea wall to see a sleeping wobbegong shark.

We would never have spotted it if not for our excellent dive guide. Also known as the carpet shark, the wobbegong is usually found in shallow waters under rocks among coral reefs and is rarely spotted unless an expert is on hand to point it out.

With the rising trend of liveaboards, I asked the crew if they thought this paradise might become crowded all too soon.

Mr Lesenechal, who has sailed these waters for 10 years, noted that he has yet to see all there is in Raja Ampat.

"With so many islands, you won't run out of private spots so soon."

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• A former journalist, Ms Mavis Teo is the owner of a media outreach and content strategy consultancy and a freelance travel writer.

GETTING THERE

An easy way to get to Sorong is to fly by Garuda Indonesia, with a stopover in Jakarta. This is the most straightforward route the gateway to Raja Ampat, where the boats are docked at a nearby port. Other routes require travelling through Makassar or Manado and are longer.

The Prana by Atzaro liveaboard (*pranabyatzaro.com*), which is run by a wellness resort in Spain, can arrange transport from Domine Eduard Osok airport in Sorong to the port.

The yacht sails in Raja Ampat from December to April and in Komodo from May to October. In between seasons, it sails through the Banda Islands.

The boat is available mostly for charter, though cabins may be available for booking as well. A full charter starts at $17,000 a day and a suite which sleeps two people starts at $2,000 a day. Prices include all meals, laundry, Internet access, water sports, diving and excursion fees.

TIPS

- Other liveaboards to look for include the Arenui, which also sails through Raja Ampat, Komodo and the Banda Islands, as well as the Forgotten Islands. Rates start at $855 a night. Samata Liveaboard operates on a charter-only basis, with rates starting at $5,100 a night for the first couple, with an extra charge at $372 a night for each guest thereafter.
- Most liveaboards that cater to scuba divers provide equipment, sometimes at a small fee, but do check with the operator in advance.
- Tipping is part of liveaboard culture. Bring cash as you will not have access to ATMs once on board. Individually tipping your favourite crew member is not encouraged as there are many staff working behind the scenes.

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