**SPECTACULAR DIVE SITES**

**INDONESIA**

By Linda Cartlidge

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Indonesia is an archipelago of 17,000 islands spanning both sides of the equator and located in the ‘Coral Triangle’ in the middle of the ‘Ring of Fire’... how can this place not be home to the best diving on the planet? Of course it is!

A fascinating destination for superyachts in search of unique and gorgeous locations, her islands are blessed with what many consider to be the world’s most spectacular scuba and snorkeling dive spots.

Pristine white sand beaches, untouched rainforests and remote villages are woven around extraordinary dive locations which present a wide diversity for all levels of experienced visitors. Exotic and unpretentious, Indonesia is attracting an ever growing number of Superyachts, whose owners are enticed by its privacy, ancient heritage, untapped adventure and untamed beauty.

Superyacht cruising in Indonesia is relatively new for local authorities and villagers alike; thus having an on board dive guide can be extremely helpful notes Captain Jimmy Blee of Asia Pacific Superyachts Indonesia. Captain Jimmy, who runs APS Indonesia along with Richard Lofthouse is a renowned boat builder and vessels operations manager, he has, over the past 20 years, also established himself as a legendary Superyacht Guide.

In planning a visiting yacht’s dive itinerary having an ‘on board dive guide’ can make a big difference to the captain and guest experience. These impressive vessels themselves, as you can imagine, tend to make quite an impression when they turn up at some of the more outlying locations and the skills of an on-board boat/dive guide come to the fore here in dealing with this attention in an empathetic and culturally effective manner. As
important, your guide will know not only the best dive spots but in an unknown underwater world, all the factors and knowledge required for safe diving in a specific area. An example would be while cruising in Papua – the ADAT, or local customs [laws], state that villages actually own the water rights to their areas for up to three miles off shore. A knowledgeable on-board guide will skillfully negotiate with the village elders in these matters if and when they appear.

Captain Jimmy and Richard happily share some of their favorite spots and suggestions for extraordinary diving and snorkeling experiences when visiting Indonesia’s Raja Ampat and Komodo National Maritime Parks.

RAJA AMPAT – FAMED FOR DIVERSITY

Captain Jimmy’s personal short list of great locations in Raja Ampat include the names of: Wayag, Kawe, Aljui Bay, Yangggefo, Dampier Strait, Batanta and Misool.

The Raja Ampat Archipelago, known as the crown jewel in the Papuan ‘Bird’s Head Seascape’ (so named for the distinctive shape of the northwestern section of the island of New Guinea), is an area with unparalleled marine biodiversity and incredible dive sites covering 50,000 sq. km. This includes hundreds of islands and an astounding diversity of habitats special to Raja Ampat - translating to wildly different diving experiences from pelagic drift dives to magic muck dives.

Raja Ampat’s reputation as one of the world’s premier dive destinations is highly reinforced with over fifteen exceptional sites to explore. Descriptions vary as some areas are dominated by soft corals and sea fans; others dazzle with amazingly diverse hard corals. There are sea grass beds, mangroves, shallow reefs, drop offs, caves and black and white sand with tons of fish, in more shapes and sizes than anywhere else in the world! And all levels of the food chain are well represented – from the pygmy...
seahorse to top predators. In many places brightly coloured soft corals can be found close to the surface which when illuminated by natural sunlight make the sites spectacularly vibrant.

The diving in Raja Ampat is also well known by Didier Romero, a highly favored Asia Pacific Superyachts Indonesia ‘Top Gun’ dive/boat guide. Born in Guadeloupe in the West Indies, Didier grew up in Paris and fell in love with diving, becoming a certified Dive Master in Mexico, then working as a dive guide in the Dominican Republic and Barbados. When traveling through the Caribbean and the Philippines as a dive instructor, he landed in Indonesia in 1999 where he continued his diving education to become a master instructor for recreational diving as well as a technical diving instructor. He extended his experience (7000+ dives) and knowledge of this wonderful archipelago as a cruise director on ‘live aboard’ diving boats operating in the Komodo region. ‘Didier speaks Indonesian like a native and has a wonderful sense of empathy for the Indonesian people and the differing cultures,’ Jimmy says’. A leader in Indonesia diving locales, one of his strengths is his ability to relate to all Indonesians whether they are high level officials or local villagers with a perception and dignity, all of which makes him an absolute asset to have on board.’

KOMODO DIVE SITES: DIVE SPLENDOR IN KOMODO
The spectacular Komodo National Marine Park presents divers and snorkelers with an overwhelming variety of marine life at a part of the ‘coral triangle’ which boasts the richest concentration of marine life in the world! The diversity of dive sites is almost unparalleled with warm, gentle reefs housing hundreds of species of colorful fish and corals to the crazed excitement of sea mounts with huge currents and massive
pelagics like manta rays, sharks and tuna through colourful nudibranch, special shrimp and frog fish.

Dolphin, eagle ray, pygmy seahorse, omate ghost pipefish, clown and blue-ringed octopus can all be seen along with many varieties of shark, turtle and even dugong, to delight all that come to experience the special beauty of Komodo. Divers are astounded at how rich the diving experience is, along with the unique geology and location between the two seas and two different climates — it is unlike anywhere else in the world.

KOMODO DIVE SITES: THE GEOLOGY MAKES IT SPECIAL
Komodo Island and Rinca were once part of Flores and are separated from the large Island of Sumbawa to the West by the Sape Strait. The ocean in the Strait drops hundreds of meters with the Pacific Ocean to the north and the Indian Ocean to the south — actually at different heights. The flow of currents from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean during tidal exchanges makes the currents here among the strongest in the world. In the (relatively) shallow waters along the east coast of Komodo towards Labuan Bajo these currents can be extremely dangerous.

With the much cooler waters of the Indian Ocean flowing north and the warm tropical waters of the Pacific flowing south, the nutrients and plankton in the water makes for a nearly perfect

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feeder zone for large pelagics. At sites like ‘Manta Alley’, dozens of them feed and play, along with sharks and other large fish, near the shallows housing corals fed year-round by cool nutrient rich waters.

Komodo is not your typical dive location and with some massive currents, huge fish and a remote location – safety is very important. Your guide in Komodo must not only understand how to lead groups but it is essential they understand daily tidal changes as well as monthly tidal strengths. Entering some sites can appear safe and then, 15 minutes later, become very dangerous. By focusing on safety Komodo dive sites are suitable for almost all levels of efficiency, with a few exceptions – including areas of strong downward currents and cold upwelling’s. The great thing about Komodo is that the safe dive sites can have almost as many fish, pelagics and fantastic corals, and can be enjoyed by all levels of divers.

Most Komodo dive sites can be accessed throughout the year; however, a few areas are seasonal. The best conditions for the Northern Komodo dive sites are April through October due to the surface conditions of less wind and rain; from October through April the better diving tends to be in the South, and again – mostly due to the surface weather conditions caused by the northern monsoonal winds.

Following are some of the more popular sites, though new sites are being discovered all the time. The division is basically along weather and water temperature conditions with the southern sites tending to have much cooler water temperatures than the northern sites.