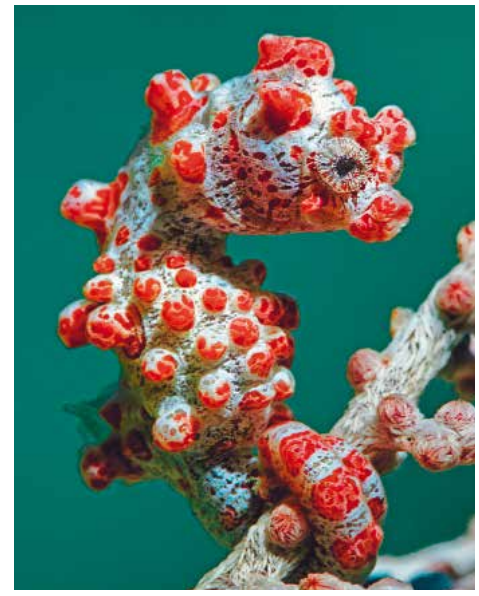
I CAN SEE CLEARLY NOW

In West Papua's remote biodiversity hotspot of Raja Ampat, a snorkeller sees the world with fresh eyes.

BY *Helen Anderson*



Above: Bargibant's seahorse. Opposite: kayakers circle Raja Ampat's karst islands.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAMY

BARELY THE length of a fingernail, Bargibant's seahorses spend their entire tiny lives anchored by their tails to a gorgonian sea fan, cantering gracefully in the warm currents, following a sedate, monogamous existence of male pregnancy and suction feeding. They're so small and so expertly camouflaged – covered in lurid-coloured knobbles, exactly mimicking their home – that no one noticed these pygmy seahorses existed until 1970, when a couple were accidentally unhitched by a marine biologist studying sea fans.

Bargibant's seahorses are a minuscule part of the astounding biodiversity of Raja Ampat, an archipelago off remote West Papua, the portion of the tropical island of New Guinea annexed by Indonesia in 1969. Raja Ampat (or Roger's Armpit, as a jokester in my life quipped) is said to have the richest biodiversity of any marine environment in the world, supporting 75 per cent of all known coral species and many still unknown in vast, intact reefscapes fringing 1500 karst islands.

The numbers are boggling. On land, 874 plant species, almost a third of them orchids, some 300 bird species, including the rarest of rare birds-of-paradise, and marsupials: echidnas, tree kangaroos and cuscuses (a sub-species of possum) among them. Underwater, more than 1500 species of reef fish and thousands of assorted creatures, from nudibranchs to sea squirts – though, really, who could count? Pull on fins and a snorkel mask and glide over any reef here, and the uncountable numbers are beside the point.

I didn't see a Bargibant's seahorse, or even a fraction of the wildlife. The miracle of the seahorse for me, the miracle of Raja Ampat, was not actually seeing it – but *being able to see it*. The exhilaration of kayaking between jungle islets and snorkelling over teeming reefs was ultimately less miraculous than mustering the courage to embark on such an adventure.

THIS STORY starts with a seven-year-old girl wearing her first pair of spectacles (pink plastic, chunky lenses already). I still recall the shock

when I realised how little I had been seeing, and I felt that jolt every time I got new, thicker lenses as the myopia and astigmatism barrelled along.

I wore contact lenses into my 20s, until I developed a reaction to preservatives in the lens fluid, and by my early 30s I was an early adopter of corrective laser surgery, which worked brilliantly – for a decade or so. By then the slow spread of corneal scarring across both eyes had begun, most likely caused by the long-ago contact-lens misfortune and more from the laser.

Years later the scarring had become so severe that even the thickest, most specialised optical lenses failed to give me decent vision. The longer I postponed surgery, my doctor kept warning me, the more difficult the corneal scraping operation needed to remove the scars, a procedure known as superficial keratectomy. The longer I waited, the more fearful I became.

Slowly, without really noticing, I stopped doing things: driving at night, ordering from chalkboard menus, swimming. I persisted with snorkelling – my great love – by fitting various masks with prescription glass, but they were heavy and slipped and leaked, and so did my confidence.

I can't remember when I stopped snorkelling. Long enough that I'd forgotten the adrenaline rush of the first inhalation, the electric volt of liberation from a body weighted in air, the thrill of being just another creature alive in the ocean.

EARLIER THIS year, two years after long-delayed surgery on both eyes, I catch a current as swift as an escalator, as warm as a bath. Beside me is a coral garden of barely believable richness and colour, growing on a shelf that slopes gently from a limestone islet, then drops off a cliff into an inky void. Instantly the neighbourhood fish pile onto the escalator with me and together we sweep over a Nemo father ushering his babies into the safety of their anemone home; we fly over Moorish idol couples promenading serenely; watch a riot of Kusama-esque clown triggerfish chase their polka-dotted rivals. As promised, the corals are astounding. Some look fungal, some floral, others look distinctly genital. Many are indescribable.

Above the hum of hyperactivity I can hear parrotfish pecking for their dinner. Every creature is furiously occupied: hunting, eating, growing, dying. And every fish, thousands of them, every outlandish coral configuration, every fluorescent colour and psychedelic pattern is sharply defined and miraculously visible – without glasses.

I see the world as if for the first time. And this is how I spend the next 10 days in the Coral Triangle: weeping with wonder, euphoric, drenched in sweat or seawater, mind-blown and largely lost for words. Either not myself or the most intense version of myself.

Raja Ampat is a holy grail for serious divers, who typically book liveaboard vessels for a week or more and dive up to four times a day at their choice of scores of ocean, reef and drift dive sites. I, too, might have become a diver, but these days I'm grateful to be tank-free. I've always loved the lo-fi simplicity of snorkelling, its lack of pretension and DIY sense of freedom. For the same no-fuss reasons I've taken up sea kayaking, the aquatic version of walking rather than driving or cycling.

Like the divers, I'd heard stories of the coral wonderland of Raja Ampat. Imagine, then, the thrill of finding a company* that stages liveaboard kayak-snorkel expeditions, allowing intrepid dawdlers to explore Raja above and below sea level at the pace of someone seeing the world anew.

Raja Ampat is a holy grail for serious divers ... who dive up to four times a day.

MY KAYAKING buddy and I arrive in the unremarkable provincial city of Sorong, a four-hour overnight flight east of Jakarta, and climb aboard the Jakaré, a handsome 30-metre phinisi, a traditional timber yacht design. "Hello-'ello-'ello-'ello-'ello!" cries the crew, beaming, and this is the joyful ululation that greets us every time we depart and return on kayaks or aboard Jakaré's Zodiac, used to dart between snorkel sites.

There are 10 of us wannabe adventurers and 12 crew, among them our German-Canadian kayak guide, Frank. "Somewhere between a walk in the park and climbing Mount Everest" is his frequent quip when asked the exertion level of an excursion. His wicked sense of humour is matched by a GPS-sharp sense of direction navigating Raja's labyrinths of islands and lagoons, all the more impressive considering he spends most of his year working in forest restoration in British Columbia.

"This afternoon we're paddling to Dugong Lake," he says early on, adding cryptically, "it's not a lake, and there are no dugongs." It's our introduction to the region's mangrove forests, unlike any I've seen before: vast, wallowing in clear water and rooted in dazzling white sand. We slide over beds of eel grass alive with nursery fish, duck beneath low-slung mangrove branches, twist and turn in single file along serpentine alleys. The air is drowsy with butterflies. Palm cockatoos scream overhead.

At the end of a narrow chasm is an S-bend that spits us into a glassy bay full of

From top, clockwise: the nutrient-rich waters of Raja Ampat, part of the Coral Triangle, support more than 1500 fish species including Moorish Idols (at left); kayakers set out from the liveaboard yacht, Jakaré; sea kayaking is the "aquatic version of walking rather than driving or cycling".

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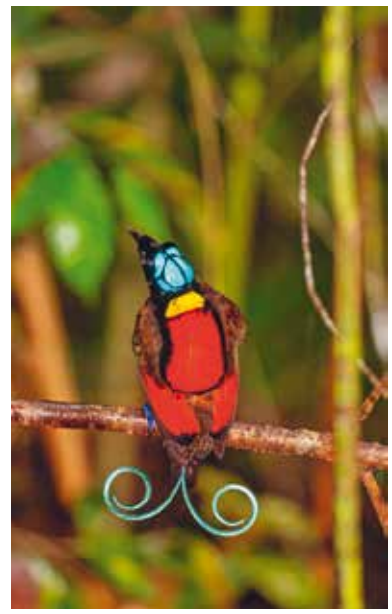

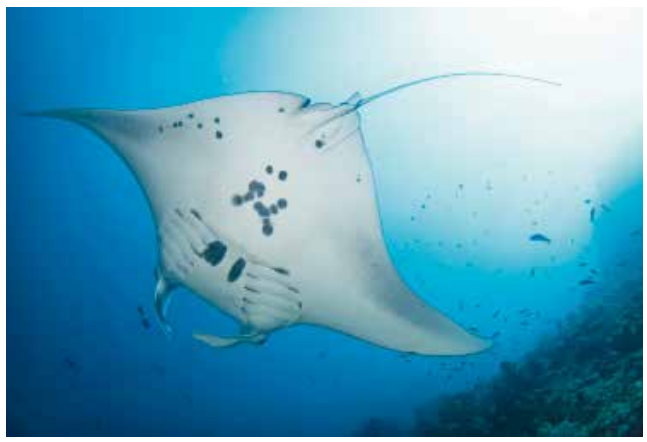

From far left, clockwise: the marine biodiversity in Raja Ampat's mangrove forests and reefs is unparalleled; a Wilson's bird-of-paradise, one of the rare species found in the region, on courtship display; snorkellers can expect to see sea turtles and manta rays. Below: Jack, the Jakare's divemaster.

mushroom-shaped islets, their limestone walls eroded neatly at water level and ringed by colour charts of reef-dappled blue. At a distance these islands are Pixar cartoon characters bristling with mop-head palms and dripping with vines and carnivorous pitcher plants. Look hard, though – there's time to do that under paddle – and each islet is subtly different, some carved into flutes or etched like dinosaur scales and splashed with ochre and black "graffiti", some shaped like conical hats, others dissolved into chimneys and arches that we glide beneath and between.

Though I see only two patches of dead coral, cause unknown, a snorkeller inevitably obsesses about the health of the world's reefs. Raja Ampat sits at the confluence of the Indonesia Throughflow and the great currents of the Pacific and Indian oceans, so along with the nutrient-rich water that fuels the region's incredible biodiversity comes plastic waste and elevated water temperatures.

At a time when 84 per cent of the planet's reefs have been affected by the worst global bleaching event on record, scientists warn that even so-called "thermal refugia" such as Raja Ampat – places with reefs that are flushed by cooler, deeper water that can buffer corals from rising surface temperatures – may no longer be shielded.

Rising sea-surface temperatures aren't the only cause of coral death; a growing threat in Raja are blooms of cyanobacteria that can smother entire colonies, a threat largely attributed to increased human sewage as tourism has surged in the past five years.

I think a lot about the preciousness of what I'm seeing, and I find child-like reservoirs of energy, for there is so little time and so much to see. Days follow a pattern of perpetual motion and *jam karet*, the useful Indonesian phrase meaning "rubber time". Each morning we're anchored in a new spot, from where we head out on two or three kayak outings and a couple of snorkels and pause for feasts of fish, fruit and Indonesian stir-fries and curries. Some days we add a swim in an underground river or hike into a forest to watch birds-of-paradise.

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One day we swim, spellbound, with manta rays, watching as they circle and hover in a queue over underwater pillars attended by cleaner wrasse, the little fish bartering a gill-cleansing scrub for a free meal of parasites. We paddle with reef sharks and turtles – or were we snorkelling at the time? I start thinking of our sorties as "kayak-snorkels";

in many lagoons the corals grow so close to the surface and the water has such clarity we don't need to get wet to see their vivid colours and fantastic forms.

Then again, we're never dry – tropical cloudbursts open over us, fat raindrops bouncing around our paddles and skin remains clammy day and night. As we plunge deeper into the archipelago the membrane between air and water, kayak and snorkel, reality and dream, begins leaking.

The humidity and the temperature are climbing in unison by the time we paddle into Pulau Balbulol in the southern reach of the archipelago, its constellation of conical islands rising 20 metres sheer from iridescent water. Just beneath the surface are clearly visible red corals and shape-shifting shoals of neon damsels. I stir the air, or the water – it's hard to tell – then stop paddling, adrift beneath pink orchids dangling off the walls. The only thing that moves with purpose is a mighty hornbill lifting off from the jungle overhead, noisy as a cargo plane in the prehistoric silence.

MEANWHILE, LIFE beneath the surface is frenetic. Next morning Jack the divemaster takes a break from the divers and joins the snorkellers. I love his big smile, his daily briefings with hand-drawn maps, his diver's repertoire of expressive hand signals identifying marine creatures. With him we tumble out of the Zodiac into water that seems to fizz. Instantly a current sweeps across the shelf beneath us, ruffling a bed of dusty-pink coral petals, and I'm bobbing alongside fusiliers and angelfish, sweetlips and parrotfish.

We nod to each other companionably and keep moving – things to do. I follow Jack's hand signal to a giant clam, pursing its purple lips suggestively as we float by. He mimics a snapping crocodile and, sure enough, there's a large unmistakably crocodile-shaped fish settled almost invisibly into the sand.

I'm trying to take all this in – this brilliant technicoloured dream – when the shelf falls away abruptly and a cool current rushes from the deep. It sweeps me up and around a corner blanketed in lacy sea fans and suddenly I'm flying inside a school of tiny shard-like fish, shattering and surging. For a moment my vision dims, eyes filled with tears. Then I blink and I'm seeing the world again, as if for the first time. ■

** Specialist adventure travel and guiding company Expedition Engineering, based on Vancouver Island, Canada, runs a handful of kayak-snorkel expeditions each year in Raja Ampat on the liveaboard yacht Jakaré, expeditionengineering.com. The writer travelled at her own expense.*