

# This Raja Ampat yachting adventure might be the world's most exclusive escape

Exploring the pristine Indonesian island paradise aboard an über-luxe phinisi schooner offers the maritime vacation of a lifetime.

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**The Raja Ampat archipelago—located at the northwest corner of Indonesia's West Papua province—encompasses over 15,400 square miles of land and sea.**

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A weathered wooden pier juts from the alabaster shore on the isle of Mansuar—a jungled sliver of limestone in Raja Ampat, Indonesia—into the cyan sea, an unremarkable jumble of planks and pilings perched a few yards above the glassy surface. But just below it, the Yenbuba jetty—named for the island’s tiny village—morphs into an aquatic Xanadu, teeming with Technicolor and life. Countless fish painted in riots of pattern—teal parrotfish finned in lavender, fawn pufferfish spotted with white—dart among posts studded with Gorgonian sea fans, their lacelike fronds flitting in shades of amber, fuchsia, and tangerine. A panoply of other coral types—staghorn, elkhorn, pipe, brain—blanket the ocean floor, creating a rainbow-hued reefscape so varied and vivid it’s dizzying to behold.

Such kaleidoscopic submarine scenes are commonplace in Raja Ampat (“Four Kings”), a chain of some 1,500 islands strewn like jewels across 29,000 square miles off the west coast of West Papua province. Straddling the Pacific and Indian oceans and anchored by the four large islands for which it’s named, the archipelago makes up the heart of the [Coral Triangle](#)—the most biodiverse marine environment on earth. Home to 76% of the world’s coral species—over 550, compared with 70 in the Caribbean—and some 1,500 types of fish, it’s often called a “species factory” by scientists, thanks to its plethora of endemic organisms (more than 70 species of reef fish, coral, and crustaceans), a list that grows with every new discovery. Simply put, Raja Ampat remains one of the world’s last virtually untouched places and a bona fide Valhalla for scuba divers and snorkelers alike.



Over 550 species of reef-building corals—75% of the world's coral species—are found in Raja Ampat.

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## Luxury meets legacy at sea

That just a handful of tiny eco-resorts exist here contributes crucially to a landscape that has barely changed since 18th-century spice traders sailed these storied waters. Most visitors opt for liveaboard boats, which travel between the islands' many far-flung destinations by night, offering the best, most efficient way to experience their myriad charms.

And there's no better way to explore this singular paradise than aboard *Prana by Atzaró*. Having first set sail in September 2018, the 180-foot superyacht—the largest and most luxurious of its kind in the world—is modeled after two-mast sailing ships called *phinisi*, traditional Indonesian vessels hand-built in the south of the

sprawling, scorpion-shaped island of Sulawesi by its Bugis people, master seafarers since ancient times.

These so-called Sulawesi schooners were originally constructed according not to drafted plans but in keeping with a series of key proportions memorized by these legendary shipwrights and passed down through generations. The enduring art of *phinisi* shipbuilding—which draws upon a healthy dose of age-old ceremony to this day—is so unique that it was inscribed in Unesco's [Intangible Cultural Heritage list](#) in 2017.



The ship's expansive outdoor space offers ideal vantage points for relishing sunsets and stargazing after nightfall.

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This rarefied *mélange* of history, ritual, and craftsmanship manifests masterfully in *Prana by Atzaró*. Fashioned entirely of teak and ironwood, her heft—411 tons—is palpable, her hand-hewn planking smooth and substantial underfoot. With almost 10,000 square feet of usable space across four decks and nine suites, the yacht—

whose other seasonal itineraries include Indonesia's Komodo National Park and the Spice Islands—sleeps 18 and is available exclusively for full-ship charter.

*Prana's* elegant solidity dovetails with the ubiquitous refinement of its onboard experience. Cabins combine contemporary design with discerning touches like hand-beaded Indonesian artifacts and amenities including smart TVs, rain showers, and stocked minibars. Those lucky enough to score *Batavia*, the exquisite master suite, will rejoice: Tucked away at the rear of the upper deck and measuring over 600 square feet, it boasts wraparound windows, double sinks, and a 215-square-foot outdoor terrace, whose plush cushioned benches are perfect for soaking up Raja Ampat's ravishing beauty.



Measuring over 600 square feet, the yacht's jaw-dropping *Batavia* master suite, located at the rear of the upper deck, features wraparound windows and a spacious private terrace.

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Ample sun beds and roomy seating areas offer plentiful options for unwinding alfresco. There's also a yoga deck that doubles as both an outdoor movie theater and a jaw-dropping cocktail party setting at dusk, when guests sip gin and tonics while

colonies of flying foxes—large fruit bats that inhabit the island of Mioskon—crowd the blazing, pink-streaked sky as the sea slowly swallows the sun.

## A peerless paradise

While luxuriating aboard is tempting—there's even a small spa staffed by Balinese therapists—Raja Ampat's staggering natural bounty beckons. Twice a day, guests pile into two tenders to zip off to another must-see site, in search of [manta rays](#), tasseled wobbegong sharks, and myriad other fascinating residents.

At Anita, a celebrated snorkeling spot near the island of Piaynemo, a shallow circular canyon ringed by coral walls creates a mesmerizing underwater Eden, slashed with sunlight and brimming with colorful coral bommies (column-like outcrops) in a slew of shapes and sizes. As ribboned sweetlips and orange clownfish play cat and mouse, a 200-strong shoal of blue-gold fusiliers suddenly storms the scene, their neon-yellow tails flashes of dazzle in the lucent depths. Nearby, a Hawksbill sea turtle—characteristically unfazed by the commotion—hovers above a two-tiered table coral sheltering a supersize sea star that virtually glows electric-cobalt.



Five of the world's seven species of rare and endangered sea turtles thrive in Raja Ampat.

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Describing the astonishing splendor of Raja Ampat defies hyperbole. Take Wayag, a cluster of islands in the West Waigeo region that are arguably its most arresting. On an exhilarating tender ride to the local ranger station through mazes of karst islets clad in towering palms, the water's hypnotizing hue—shifting from crystalline aquamarine in the lagoons to pellucid sapphire in the open sea—will leave even the world-weariest traveler gobsmacked. Standing knee-deep among blacktip reef sharks as they patrol the shallows at the station—the sun-blasted sand blindingly white and the ocean striped in glittering bands of azure and indigo—you'll wonder if you've somehow landed on another planet.

Awe-inspiring spectacles abound above the surface as well as below—deserted beaches, wild mangroves, and lush emerald rain forests among them. On the islands of Gam, Waigeo, and Batanta, intrepid birders seek out elusive birds of paradise, the exotic creatures that British scientist Alfred Russel Wallace—who spent eight years exploring Raja Ampat beginning in 1854, where he devised the theory of natural

selection independently of Charles Darwin—called “one of the most beautiful and wonderful of living things.”

## Gourmet cuisine and beach barbecues

If all this marveling leaves you famished, you've come to the right ship. Much like overstating Raja Ampat's otherworldly majesty, exaggerating the quality of *Prana by Atzaró's* world-class cuisine is a tall order. The sprawling early-morning spread will seduce even avowed breakfast foes with steaming bowls of spicy *nasi goreng* (Indonesian fried rice), heaping platters of pineapple, papaya, and purple dragon fruit, and eggs cooked perfectly to order.



**Prana by Atzaró's array of world-class cuisine, served alfresco at lunch and dinner, includes both Indonesian and Western favorites.**

JASON REPOSAR

Alfresco lunches are veritable feasts usually served family-style—think delicately roasted local snapper, zingy papaya salad with peanuts and mint, and tender shrimp sautéed in spicy *sambal*—that elicit choruses of compliments until the last bite. Dinners—both family-style smorgasbords and artful multicourse affairs—prove equally irresistible. An authentic Lebanese extravaganza with silky hummus, lamb

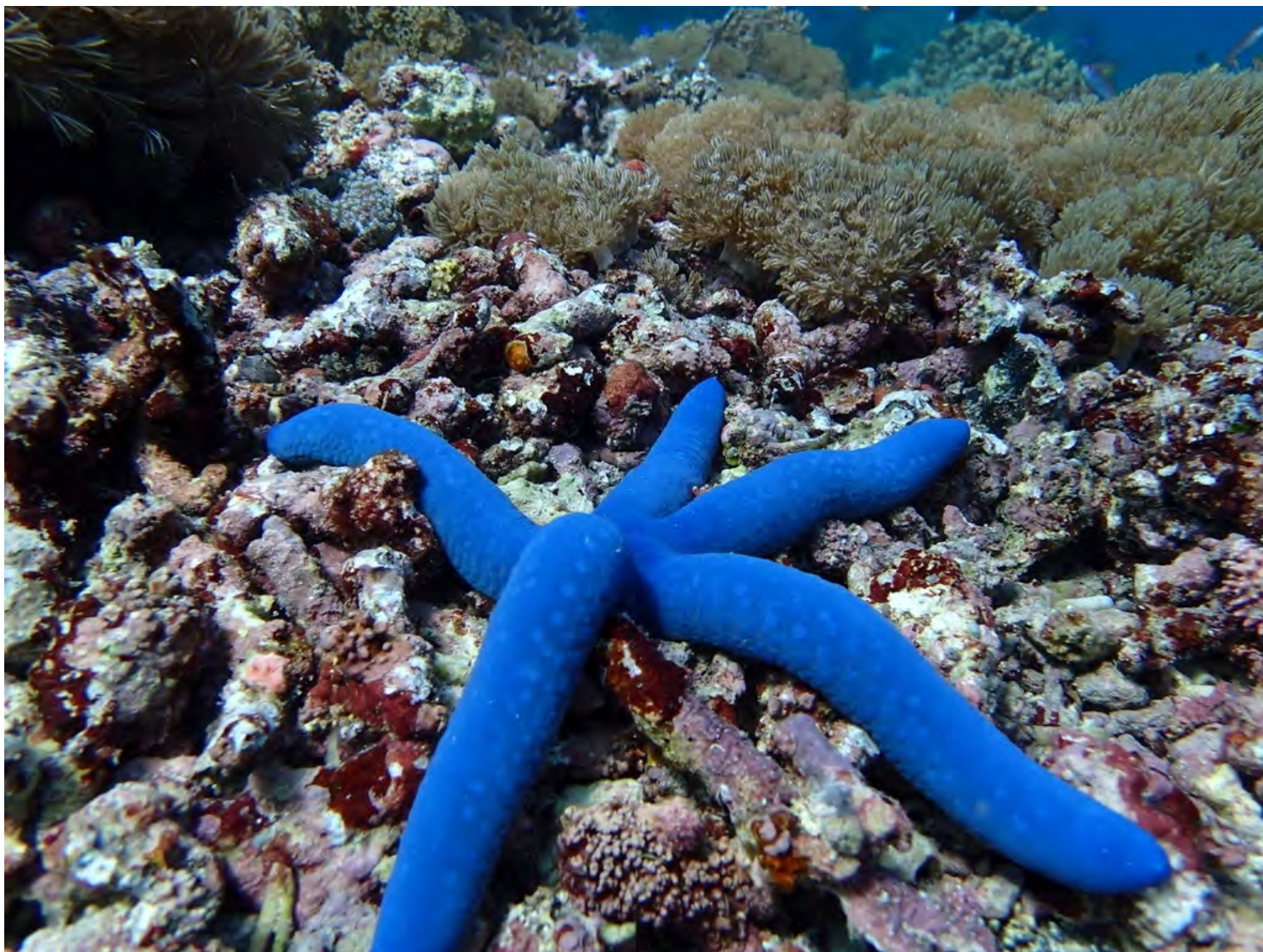


shawarma, and crispy falafel earns raves, as does a hearty steak dinner that commences with mushroom quinoa risotto and concludes with fruit-topped panna cotta.

Memorable beach barbecues showcase the considerable talents of the yacht's ever-smiling, supremely competent crew. Guests are squired by tender to a nearby island for a festive repast of succulent grilled lobster and apropos fixings, washed down with icy margaritas and crisp rosé, served at the water's edge under a dual canopy of twinkling white lights and a star-spangled sky. An entrancing fire dance—performed by Anaëlle, one of *Prana's* charming dive instructors—rounds out an evening for the books.

## Protecting an increasingly vulnerable ecosystem

While Raja Ampat's relative isolation has helped safeguard its near-prehistoric quality, its fragile ecosystem still faces a barrage of threats from activities like illegal fishing and improper waste disposal. Efforts to protect the islands, undertaken by the organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund and [Conservation International](#), include designating a network of [marine protected areas \(MPAs\)](#) and creating more sustainable tourism activities that benefit local residents.



Home to the richest marine biodiversity remaining on the planet, Raja Ampat has been described by scientists as a “species factory” thanks to its plethora of endemic organisms.

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One of the most pioneering marine conservation initiatives underway is the *Kalabia*, a 110-foot former tuna trawler that brings interactive environmental education to more than 100 of the area’s remote coastal villages. *Kalabia* won the [2018 Unesco-Japan Prize on Education for Sustainable Development](#) and is expanding its programming to reach all Papuan communities in the near future.

As for increasingly devastating and less manageable catastrophes—namely global warming—research suggests that many of [Raja Ampat’s coral species may be more resistant to rising ocean temperatures](#)—offering hope that they might replenish others nearby damaged by coral bleaching.

Meanwhile, the islands' remoteness has helped stave off the over-tourism to which destinations like Hawaii and the Maldives have fallen prey. Sorong—West Papua's largest city and the gateway to Raja Ampat—is served by a few daily direct flights from Jakarta but not from Bali, Indonesia's most popular tourist hotspot. The relative complexity of acquiring land in the country, coupled with governmental efforts to deter development, has also kept visitor numbers in check—but for how long, who's to say.



Launched in September 2018, the 180-foot teak-and-ironwood Prana by Atzaró is the largest and most luxurious phinisi yacht in the world, with almost 10,000 square feet of usable space across four decks.

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In *The Malay Archipelago*, his 1869 account of his years in Raja Ampat, Alfred Russel Wallace wrote, “Situated upon the Equator, and bathed by the tepid water of the great tropical oceans, this region...teems with natural productions which are elsewhere unknown.” With commitment, vigilance, and plenty of luck, may its ineffable magic endure.