

Reef checking Raja Ampat

CATHY FINCH and her daughter take us on a diving holiday to the birthing wards of the world's reefs, in the name of ocean conservation.



For the inexperienced divers among us, the briefing to our afternoon dive at The Passage sounds like a horror rollercoaster ride.

Wendy, our dive guide, draws a diagram of the terrain, tide and critters we can expect to encounter but delivers her brief firmly, warning to be vigilant of hectic undercurrents ripping upwards, downwards and in confusing directions. As one of Raja Ampat's most unique dive sites, this 25-metre-wide channel of water between the islands of Gam and Waigeo delivers an exhilarating insight into the dramatic beauty of surrounding jungle, spooky caves and marine environments. That's if you get time to see it; there's the possibility of just hooking into a reef rock and holding on for dear life.

Of course, if you're an adventurous 15-year-old with a newly qualified PADI Advanced Underwater Diver ticket, it all sounds way cooler than a theme park. And so I relent, and agree to go along for the ride.

Ride of all rides

Raja Ampat has been the ride of all rides. Located at the intersection of the Indian and Pacific oceans in the northwest corner of Indonesia's West Papua province, 'Raja' is one of more than 1,500 islands surrounded by reefs said to be the most biodiverse in the world. Reportedly home to over 1,400 species of fish and 75 per cent of the world's known coral species, this is a significant birthing ground for everything marine and

the currents. Here, both coral and fish larvae come into being to be hurtled along ocean streams, and are funnelled out to replenish reefs all around the world.

What better place, then, for my daughter to choose for school work experience, based on the preservation of our ocean and reefs?

Located on Arborek Island, one hour by boat from Waisai, it takes two plane flights from Bali, a ferry and a boat ride to pull up at our **Barefoot Conservation** home, a white-sand-rimmed post swirling with schools of scads, trevally, needlefish and a host of sea life right under the island jetty.

Reef renditions

Over the following weeks, we have an active schedule to work through to be able to assist the island scientists with their research. Throughout Reef Check training, we learn how to identify key organisms, the threats, and how we can be part of the solution. It's a program I would recommend to any diver wanting to deepen their knowledge of the ocean and aid the survival of the reef.

Our home for the month, while stunning, is extremely basic. Extending out over translucent blue water, our shack made of pandan leaf is a retreat where I lie and listen, sedated by the tropical warmth, to the tempo of the tides. There's no electricity during the day and no running water. It is not for everyone, but it is the Barefoot Conservation way: blending with the island-living



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population, who draw you into their families as if one of their own. For a family diving/snorkelling holiday with western trimmings, nearby resorts such as **Kri Eco Resort** offer higher accommodation standards, but without the volunteer and conservation component.

Here on Arborek Island, everyone has come together for one common passion: marine conservation. A doctor from England is dedicating a year to help with Reef Check while administering medical help to volunteers and islanders; there's a shark scientist from South Africa, a dive instructor from Canada, a marine biologist and manta ray scientist from Australia, and a young guy from Switzerland who wants to work in the field of skin engineering. The list goes on, and from this extraordinarily diverse mixture of minds, we learn.

Liveboard life

As a perfect finish to our diving and volunteer vacation, we board Barefoot's liveboard dive vessel, *Ratu Laut*, travelling to the most spectacular reefs in West Papua. I hold my daughter's hand underwater amid swirling schools of snapper, sweetlip, bumphead parrotfish, butterflyfish and fusiliers. There are wobbegongs and other sharks, pygmy seahorses, cuttlefish, squid, rays, schooling jacks, barracuda, frog fish and pipefish, and corals I have never before laid eyes on. We dive at sunrise, mid-morning, afternoon and night, at the most extraordinary dive sites.

A highlight of our topside journey is stepping off to clamber over the jagged rocks of Mt Pindito for a view of Pulau Wayag, an area of astounding beauty made up of conical karst islands covered in dense jungle and rimmed by a translucent, turquoise sea. It's the perfect postcard picture to take home to remind us of our crazy mother-daughter ride – and the urgent need for us to preserve this great ocean and its creatures. ●

Raja Ampat Report Card

Info indonesia.travel/au

Getting there Fly to Sorong via Jakarta. From Sorong, take a local ferry to Waisai on the island of Waigeo. Tickets can be purchased on day of travel from the port building. A private

Barefoot boat does the one-hour transfer from Waisai to Arborek Island.

Stay barefootconservation.org
papua-diving.com