

Raja Ampat Trip Report NOV 2006
Peter Maerz

PART 1

Hello Wet Ones,

Here's my report on a fantastic trip aboard the SMY Ondina:

The trip was one of two in the area organized every year by Deb Fugitt out of Texas, one of the first to fully recognize the value of this amazing area to divers. Deb's a fantastic photographer and organizes her trips around that pursuit. She also happens to be an amazingly dedicated trip organizer; for the better part of a year, we exchanged emails at least once a week, often times in flurries, as the shifting tides of Indonesian trip planning affected ours. Rarely did I have to wait more than a few minutes for a reply to an email. Deb managed to keep abreast of every one of her 12 passengers' complex travel plans and guide us every step of the way.

(DebF note, I had 55 complex itineraries for 2006 Ondina trips!)

Travel to Asia is, well, travel to Asia, especially if you place yourself at the mercy of an airlines Frequent Flier program. Countless hours in airborne limbo. I took advantage of a couple of lengthy layovers, though, and managed to spend a full day in Seoul touring palaces and a good number of hours comfortably asleep in a free travel lounge in the amazing Singapore transit terminals. I also heartily recommend Korean Airlines; they're a real throwback- from 1950's style "stewardess" uniforms (and, forgive me, knockout women obviously chosen for their appearance as well as their safety other skills) to tending to your every whim, to providing very reasonable legroom, even in coach, these folks aim to please.

I spent a part of two days and a night in a jungle reserve some hours outside of Manado, called Tangkoko. It's worth the trip if you have time enough (but not enough time to dive in the area). The tiny, huge-eyed Tarsier monkeys that pop out of tree knots at dusk are a sight to behold. But they pale in comparison to the throngs of apes that congregate at dawn. They seem fairly oblivious to human presence. One sidled up to me and, while locking his eyes on mine, proceeded to gently gnaw on my shoulder. Flocks of the monkeys ripped through the trees, shredding leaves as they swung from branch to branch in wild play. Others lay in knots on the dusty ground, grooming each other.

Members of our liveaboard party gathered at 1 in the morning in the splendorous, if worn-around-the-edges lobby of Manado's wonderfully named "Ritzy Hotel" for a surreal, full course breakfast in the otherwise deserted, palatial restaurant area adjacent to the lobby. Soon after, we were met in the lobby by three micro vans for our trip back to the airport. Once there, we were assisted through check in (and modest luggage overage bribes--uh, I mean charges--) by Deb's trip organizers.

After a short, two hour flight to Sorong, we were met at the airport by Deb, her partner Tony and other members of hers and the Ondina's crew. We drove through the oily, decrepit streets of this backwater town to the concrete docks at the edge of a greasy bay, studded with rusting, half-submerged hulks, as well as a handful of the "Pinisi" schooners that carry divers to paradise. As laconic, sullen onlookers gazed steely eyed from their perches on crumbling benches, we shiny clean westerners and our enormous loads of luggage were taken from van to "RIB" (Dinghy) and then whisked across the dawn-streaked water to the mother ship.

PART 2

The Ondina is a diver's dream. Constructed from bow to stern entirely of wood in the traditional Pinisi style, the vessel is not only beautiful to look at, but specifically caters to the liveaboard life.

The lower deck houses 4 double cabins and 2 singles in the bow. My single cabin was a wonder of comfort and practical use of space. The single bunk, perched some three feet above the deck, created both a spacious sleeping and laptop- working environment and a huge storage area beneath. My two large rolling duffels, good sized roll aboard and various and sundry dive spare dive gear were easily swallowed up by this space. Above the head of the bed, a shelf wide enough to hold my laptop and long enough to accommodate tissue boxes, books, magazines, etc. lay below a genuine brass and glass porthole, set about 5 feet above the waterline. Lighting was excellent, with track-style fixtures aimed at your bedtime book, your cabinets, and the entryway to the cabin.

Next to the foot of the bed, two cabinets stood floor to ceiling, each with a shelf dividing its space and a door that latched firmly. There was more than enough room inside for any amount of clothes a seasoned liveaboard traveler would dream of bringing, as well as a raft of camera equipment and other goodies.

The “ensuite” head was very clever. A beautiful, obviously hand-made “vanity” housed a sink and cleverly designed compartments for toiletries and other bathroom gear, below a second porthole. In front of the sink were wood pallets made of the same dark-stained, sturdy material that comprised the rest of the vessel. These served to keep my feet above the waterline created by the handheld shower on the wall when in use. A hooded toilet paper roll protected the paper from errant spray. The marine head worked well most of the time, though hand-pumped and unable to accommodate toilet paper. (“Yes”, one of our dive masters explained, when I inquired, somewhat sheepishly, “The no-paper rule means no paper of *any* kind.”). However, a handy, lined and well-sealed, swivel-topped wastebasket next to the head was emptied every day.

The main deck encompassed all the major activity on board. The bow was off limits to passengers, strewn as it was with rigging, ropes, heavy equipment and anchor chain spools. Just aft of it, though, was a lovely deck area and built-in heavy wooden table and benches, a common gathering area during our cruise. This abutted the sliding windows of the salon. Inside were two large tables parallel to each other, surrounded along their outer perimeters by continuous, padded booths and separated by two groups of heavy wooden chairs. We were warned early on of the capacity of these babies to bust your knuckles between their armrests if you slid your chair without care.

In the stern of the main deck, a built-in camera prep table and storage shelves with woven plastic baskets provided adequate, if not abundant working space for the boatload of serious photographers on board. The table was topped with the kind of perforated rubber mats used on floors by restaurant workers to cushion their feet from concrete floors. The area was partially, though not completely shielded from weather.. A few windy rain squalls soaked everything and, once, that included stuff inside a ziplock I hadn't entirely sealed, along with a sweatshirt I'd stashed in my basket. No damage done, though. Also, one disconcerting and potentially hazardous drip emanated from the ceiling over the camera table, seeming to take dead aim at any open housing below. Built in light fixtures aided camera prep. Two large camera-only rinse tanks were built into the deck opposite the prep table. These had thick, soft rubber mats along their bottoms and sturdy, hinged lids.

On the other side of the bulkhead from these was the enclosed dive prep room. Each of us was assigned a bench space and tank in typical liveaboard protocol. We were also given permanent dive tender assignments according to our bench space. Teams were delineated before the first dive, Red 1, Red 2, Blue 1 and Blue 2. Each corresponded to one of the tenders, red or blue, one each on the starboard and port sides of the mother ship. Red and Blue left pretty much at the same time, dropped their divers and returned for their second loads. The order of boarding boats 1 or 2 changed once per day, so every other day, I and my tender-mates would be among the first to board.

On the fore bulkhead of this room were briefing white boards, the entrance to the bridge, and a

floor-to-ceiling matrix of assigned cubbies with charging power strips and our own, number-personalized thick blue towels. These protected bins provided convenient charging stations as well as storage for spare ports. Though most all charging equipment these days accommodates 220 as well as 110 volts, those without that flexibility would have a problem with the all-220 setup.

Outside of this room, a few feet up the deck, wetsuits were hung in a narrow shower room with a large freshwater tank at its rear. On the wall opposite the wetsuits were mounted two compact instant water heating units and accompanying handheld metal shower hoses and heads.

The top deck of the Ondina, directly in front of the windows of the bridge, served as a lounging area with pretty wooden chaises lined up in rows facing port and starboard. Depending on the time of day, certain of these were in blazing sunlight while others rested in shade.

PART 3

The crew consisted of a dozen or so Indonesians who stuck to their specialties, from kitchen work to engine room work to working the tender boats, to sailing the mother ship. They seemed to be perpetually amused, often roaring with laughter, even as they performed repetitive, hard labor for 14 hours a day. Their English language skills were extremely limited (though far exceeding my 6 or 8 words of Indonesian!), but they certainly knew 'KAHM-er-ah', "REDD-ee" and other essentials with an occasional "many fish!" thrown in for good measure.

Dive briefings were extensive, though fun. Our Spanish lead divemaster, Norberto, from the Canary Islands, had a hilarious time with his efforts at English pronunciation, fluent though he is in Indonesian, Italian and, to some extent, German. (He's a funny guy who's traveled to the ends of the earth, including deep inside Papua where he was embraced by a tribe who'd hardly ever seen outsiders. He showed us photos on his laptop of himself dressed in nothing but a tiny penis sheath, shoulder to shoulder and arm over arm with the fiercely war-painted tribesmen. The next slide offered the rear view.) On occasion, Deb would chime in to correct a word or further explain.

There were a number of sites that involved "split drops". These were areas where strong currents converged in a sort of "vee". The idea was to drop as quickly as possible right at the convergence point and swim forward into the current. If one failed, she/he'd be swept over the reef to be embarrassingly picked up by the tender driver and dropped again. (I don't think anyone met with that fate during our trip). These conditions and others were thoroughly explained, though once I entered into an argument over the north/south orientation of the briefing diagram that ended up thoroughly confusing everyone!

The boarding sequence began with the crewmembers hauling our tanks with attached BCs and regs down the suspended stairway to the tenders. A crew member inquired each and every time as to which was your camera and carried it ahead of you to the tender. Once all was in place, we were invited aboard. After a short ride out to the site, we were helped into our rigs. Once ready and at the exact spot determined to be the optimum, on the count of three we backrolled in, swam back to the boat as quickly as possible, were handed our cameras and bolted headfirst down to the bottom.

According to Deb and the dive masters, this was an unusual excursion among the dozen or so they've done in the area. Apparently the currents were often all haywire: either non-existent (NOT good for fish profusion) or coming from the "wrong" direction. Some of the most highly touted and most written about sites, such as Cape Kri, were all but devoid of fish and plagued with very poor viz. That said, it was still a pretty spectacular trip for me.

One site, Melissa's Garden, was perhaps my favorite of all time. I was all but weeping in my mask with the sheer splendor of it. The garden in question is impossibly profuse with corals of every size and description, hard and soft, distributed in fields, clumps, outcroppings, small "mountains",

canyons, hills and valleys. There was a brain coral the size of a large igloo, with nary a mark on it. There were cup corals in the thousands, in wide open, orange splendor, climbing the walls of a coral face that formed the subterranean wall of a tiny rock island. Branching corals, including staghorns, formed vast fields, infested with clouds of tiny hovering anthias and other coral fish. Oriental sweetlips hovered cautiously under spreading umbrellas of table corals. A huge giant clam, lavender, green and black, lay open like a small Volkswagen whose roof had been cut away, exposing swollen upholstery. A large, beige and brown Wobbegong shark lounged on large scalloped coral, protruding eyeballs peering up from its weirdly fringed, flat face. Amid all this, reef fish flowed like rivers, lion fish hovered like alien spacecraft, occasional sharks darted and the sun blessed them all with glowing shafts of light. I got to dive this site four times.

Another locale, aptly called “waterlogged”, is a relatively shallow site without much dramatic coral, but absolutely peppered with critters, including wire coral crabs, nudibranchs of every size, color and description, Coleman shrimp and many more. I did 9 dives there and got the best photos of the trip, up close and personal with my spectacular 105mm lens, though many of the subjects I shot I never would have seen without the aid of our divemasters and some of my fellow passengers. Sometimes I couldn't even see the subject while I was *shooting* it! I just dutifully pointed my camera where directed and fired away! The dives here averaged 75 minutes, with a number of them pushing 80 or more.

As you can see, it was not uncommon to dive a site multiple times. This was one manifestation of Deb and Tony's photo-oriented liveaboard philosophy. The idea was to become familiar with a site and where its treasure lay, as well as acclimatize any fish upon it to our presence and “tame” them into willingness to be our subjects. One site, Fabiacet, was relatively small, but we stayed there for two days. (It was here that I logged my 400th dive). That site did have it's gorgeous regions and also featured schools of barracuda and Mobula rays on occasion as well as a few Mantas, but those always just out of camera range and in fierce current. In the case of this Fabiacet site, though, I did get a little itchy to move on and experience something new.

One of the “famous” Raja Ampat sites, Sardine Reef, did live up to its reputation. We did one dive here on the outbound leg and one on the inbound of our journey. Both were spectacular. The site's name is derived from the image of fish being so abundant as to be packed together like sardines. The name is apt! Millions of fish swarmed in all directions. Glittering balls of silversides, like snowstorms, flitted and swirled before my eyes. In one area of hard driving current, a battalion of Bumpheads faced the oncoming water, barely moving within their formation. They let me approach from their flank closely enough to fire off a bunch of photos at near point-blank range. And, always, the parade of reef fish, from the blazing beauty of coral trout to entire reference book chapters of butterfly fish to jewel-like blue masked, regal, emperor and saddled angelfish to surgeon fish to friendly dance troupes of Moorish idols.

At another site, Mike's Point, we fought our way forward to a group of about 100 sweet lips in tight formation, again hovering motionless in the killer current. After much mad finning, struggling to place myself in front of the crowd, I turned to fire off a photo, only to be swept headlong right through them, breaking up the knot and temporarily spoiling the shot for others.

We did a few night dives at jetties. Many folks felt these were spectacular and they certainly did turn up their share of bizarre critters. For me, though, this is not my favorite type of diving: crawling along the sand in two feet of water, fins breaking the surface, digging through tires and cloudy bottles to find the otherworldly denizens of the shallows. The last of these jetty dives took place at a site far from the mother ship. This involved a long, cold, spray-drenched motor on the tender. After 45 minutes under, I was so cold I had to surface, only to sit on the boat, wrapping my arms about myself, for 30 minutes until we had a “quorum” of divers large enough to warrant sending the tender back to the ship.

I did get quite nippy on a number of dives, even though I was wearing a five mil jumpsuit with a tropical hood for every dive. The water temp dipped to 78 on a few occasions, though it hovered

in the low 80s for the most part. Still, with 5 dives a day, I managed to get pretty chilled. On my next trip, I bring my 5/3 hooded vest! (Many of my fellow passengers laughed at my 5 mil at the start of the trip but were keeping pretty quiet by the end! Again, the water temp was unusually low for this trip, according to Deb, who also got a bit chilled at times in her tropical skin.)

Sadly, overcast and rain shrouded many of our dives, dulling the colors that would have, no doubt, been spectacular if sunlit. A couple of rains put the wooden vessel to the test, finding courses through the seams to drip into buckets in the hallways and rooms. There were a few hot and sunny days, though, that really showed off the reefs below and the gorgeous, largely uninhabited rock islands above.

PART 4

Mealtimes were feasts of food and fun. At the main mealtimes, the serving doors would open on the kitchen and the ever smiling and often giggling kitchen girls and guy would set out the platters of food and explain their content and provenance. In 10 days aboard the ship, there was never, and this bears repeating, never a duplicate lunch or dinner. Breakfasts varied considerably as well, including a "Spanish" breakfast during which we were encouraged to smear raw garlic cloves on toast and devour our spicy omelets along with. Other breakfasts included soups(!), which, while startling at first, proved to be very delicious and totally compatible with the first meal of the day. There were the obligatory French toast, pancake and fried egg breakfasts sprinkled in among the more exotic.

Lunches almost always included some kind of chicken and some kind of fish but there the similarity ended. Saucy and spicy were common denominators but, again, there was wide variation in the ingredients and flavors therein. Almost all the fare carried with it some heat but, unless brave enough to include a microscopic drop of the REAL fiery stuff in tiny bowls on the tables, we were all easily able to handle it.

Dinners were just spectacular, sometimes inviting moments of silence to fully savor the servings. Shrimps, fishes and even lowly chicken were made to dance with flavor and spice on our palates. Now, we're not talking cuisine here, with delicate nuances of this and that and finicky presentation; this food was robust. But, nonetheless, it was lip-smacking, belly-rubbing, mouth-watering good. Maybe the best part is that it was what I like simply to call "Real Food"—no gloppy, cheesy, floury sauces, no food enhancers or any hint of anything processed. All energy stuff, with loads of fresh vegetables and, with every single meal, an endlessly refreshed platter of a fruit-of-the-meal, such as papaya, melon or exotic fruits of the area.

Mid-afternoon dives were always complimented with a blended juice drink of some kind. These ranged from the simple and soothing to the other-worldly, like the drink of chalky off-white liquid with what looked for all the world to be legumes sunk on the bottom like ballast. (No one ever quite figured out what *that* was, or how it was intended to be imbibed!). Cookies and other sweet treats were always available at those times as well. Also, a fruit basket was constantly kept full, though I managed to eat my way through the entire stash of Granny Smith apples (what an unexpected treat!) before the end of the cruise.

The fun part of mealtimes, aside from the eating adventures, was the camaraderie among the pleasant, sociable and often hilarious guests and crew. One guest, a Discovery Channel contributor, almost always had his big video rig hooked up to the TV monitor. Many conversations took place with eyes averted to avoid missing one of Hugh's finds. When his videos weren't playing, Deb's were. She too had an uncanny ability to find and beautifully "film" the most splendid and cooperative underwater subjects.

Many of the guests had great travel stories to relate, some truly remarkable. As mentioned, our main dive guide, a sort of first mate to Deb and Tony, Norberto, was a great raconteur and quite the clown. Many a meal found him as the focus of our attention as he related often-hilarious

stories of his adventures.

On occasion, mostly during the occasional heavy rain shower, there would be a group silently watching a Hollywood DVD in the salon. Quite often, especially in the evening hours, someone would be editing photos on their laptop, attracting small knots of onlookers, some of whom were positioned outside the salon in the dark on a bench there, looking in through an open window.

Sunsets, when visible, were always breathtaking, sending streaks of impossible colors like slow-moving auroras across the sky until the sun sank like a tiny nuclear bead into the small slate waves. As the dark fell like a palpable force, some of the crew would start strumming their beat up ukuleles and guitars, whose missing strings mimicked their players' teeth. Their hugely joyous and energetic strumming and singing seemed like a contradiction to the 14 hour day of hard labor they'd just put in.

Topside views consisted of long, hilly islands, densely thatched with palms and undergrowth or, just as often, small rock islands with shapes rivaling the Grand Tetons. Arches, sheer walls, multiple points, all presented themselves, sometimes with a handful of trees jutting out at crazy angles. Near the end of the cruise, we took an hour-long tender tour of a group of these islands, finding ourselves circling in tiny lagoons with majestic walls looming above, racing through head-ducking openings under arches and framing island behind island behind island shots. The sun was intense enough to sear my thighs, on which I'd forgotten to smear lotion. It took a moment to figure out what was going on when, two weeks after I'd returned home, snow seemed to fall from my pant legs.

The tour ended with a photo-op circling of the Ondina, now underway and, for the first time on the voyage, in full sail. As a finale, one of the crew members scuttled up a mast, sans ropes, pegs or any other climbing aid and, within seconds, found himself atop it, some hundred feet above the deck. He then precariously worked his way across some rigging and stood atop the mainmast, arms out and hooting. It was a fitting culmination of our journey.