

Seeking lifelong memories – and abundant childcare – Stewart Campbell sets sail with his brood on board 167ft Dunia Baru in Raja Ampat

SIX GO SAILING

The shark cruised lazily into view, coasting just above the soft corals with a disarming lack of interest in the startled divers hovering nearby. We had been told an encounter with a blacktip was likely in the fauna-rich waters of Raja Ampat in Indonesia but still, it's a shark. We've all seen *Jaws*. And this was only our second ever dive. Beside me, my 10-year-old daughter flashes the "OK" sign and we watch as the predator continues on its serene passage into the murky distance and out of sight.

Under the calm instruction of our PADI-certified cruise director Clive White, we continue exploring the mind-boggling diversity of life at this dive site in the Wayag Archipelago. Commercial fishing is banned in the Raja Ampat Marine Park, with the result that life abounds: schools of fish of impossible colors; vast coral structures hide – to the delight of my children – Nemos, Dorys and the occasional spiny lobster; stealthy barracuda hug the ocean floor; and, if you're lucky, the shadow of a manta ray looms from the depths like some science-fiction behemoth.

"I've dived the Barrier Reef and all over the Pacific, and for tropical diving Raja Ampat is the pinnacle," says White. "It's where the Indian





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Ocean and Pacific Ocean meet, so you get lots of current and nutrients in the water, which is very healthy for the coral. It just doesn't come much better than this."

It's reassuring to know we've started our scuba careers at the very top – and, fittingly, on one of the finest phinisi yachts available to charter in Indonesia. We had joined 167ft *Dunia Baru* in Sorong four days previously. This city is the gateway to the entire Raja Ampat cruising area. For the Campbells, it had been a sapping journey, from London via Bali, with four kids in tow – aged 10, seven and four-year-old twins. But we knew, having experienced an Indonesian charter before, that a boatload of babysitters awaited us; Indonesian crew will quickly adopt your children. They become family.

Dunia Baru is fresh from a four-week maintenance period and her heavily varnished ironwood hull gleams as we approach in the chase boat. After settling in, White lays out the week's program as we slip out of the anchorage. Our route will take us on a "best of" tour of the region, over seven nights and covering 370 nautical miles. From Sorong, we'll head south to Misool, before turning north to Wayag and looping back around to Sorong. The big passages – at most 10 hours – are done overnight so each morning brings a new postcard backdrop for breakfast.

The kids all slip into superyacht life with worrying ease. This, I'm keen to remind them at every opportunity, is not the new normal and fortunately there are opportunities to keep their feet on the ground. We stop at the tiny barefoot village of Sauwandarek on the island of Mansuar, site of the future *Dunia Baru* Learning Center, a project initiated by the yacht's owner, Mark Robba. The center will become a place of learning and teaching for villagers and passing yachts, with a focus on preserving Raja Ampat's unique habitats and developing local skills. The whole village turns out for our visit, with a chorus line of schoolchildren marking our landfall with song.

We visit the school and hand out supplies and soon our four are lost in the tangle of kids playing on the beach. It was an encounter like this that inspired Robba to build the learning center here: "My six-year-old son had such a great time [in Sauwandarek], snorkeling and playing with the children – it was special, and such a beautiful place. To have an ongoing connection to this village has my family and me very excited." He now hopes to roll out the project to other nearby islands.

Our previous Indonesian experience was in Komodo, which is much more arid and far less vertical. In Raja Ampat, some islands jag up from the perfect sea like giant stalagmites while others look as if they've been flicked randomly across the seascape like paint from a brush. All are covered in deep emerald

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEWART CAMPBELL



jungle. This is certainly the case in Misool, one of the four main islands in Raja Ampat, which we reach after an overnight passage from Sorong. Pearl farming seems to dominate in Misool. Ramshackle villages on stilts sit in the shallow waters, housing hundreds of workers who spend months at a time tending nearby oyster beds.

We stop at one of these villages briefly to pick up some guides for our first adventure – swimming through a vast cave structure called Tomolol. The cave mouth yawns open before us and the children are initially a little fearful about swimming into it, but clever Clive arms them with waterproof torches and soon they're paddling forward. Around the first bend, the light vanishes completely and the ceiling is so far above us that the torch beams fail to reach the thousands of resident

DECK HANDS

Emma, 10, Isla, 7, Ewan and Mara, 4 (right) are made to feel part of the crew on board *Dania Baru*



bats we can hear shuffling in the darkness. It's like being in a giant sensory deprivation tank.

We dive for the first time on our third day. Anyone over 10 is able to do a Discover Scuba Diving course with a PADI instructor, of which there are two on board. After a 30-minute briefing on the mothership, we're speeding in a RIB to a gently shelving reef in the Boo Islands. I had always assumed learning to dive required hours in some featureless local swimming pool – so I was very happy to discover I could be breathing underwater for the first time in coral heaven within an hour of someone saying "Would you like to dive today?" The course doesn't contribute to a PADI qualification, but it gives you a solid grasp of the basics. Emma, our 10-year-old, is hooked immediately.

The highlight of our week underwater comes in Penemu, home to Melissa's Garden, one of the world's best dive sites. The current around the outcrops that mark the site can run a little strong, so Emma misses out, but my wife and I are keen to explore. Thirty feet down the coral reef explodes into life – sea snakes, rabbitfish, lionfish, barracuda and sharks all proliferate. It's the only place we dive where we're running into other dive groups, but the coral area is so vast it's easy to drift off into your own world. We've got an hour of air; it's not enough.

At each location we see other boats but they're never within shouting distance. In Wayag, where the water is so clear the RIB bobbing a few feet off the beach looks like it's floating in thin air, we exist in perfect isolation. There are so many corners to hide a boat among the scattered islands in this little archipelago that no one needs a neighbor. Here, at the ranger

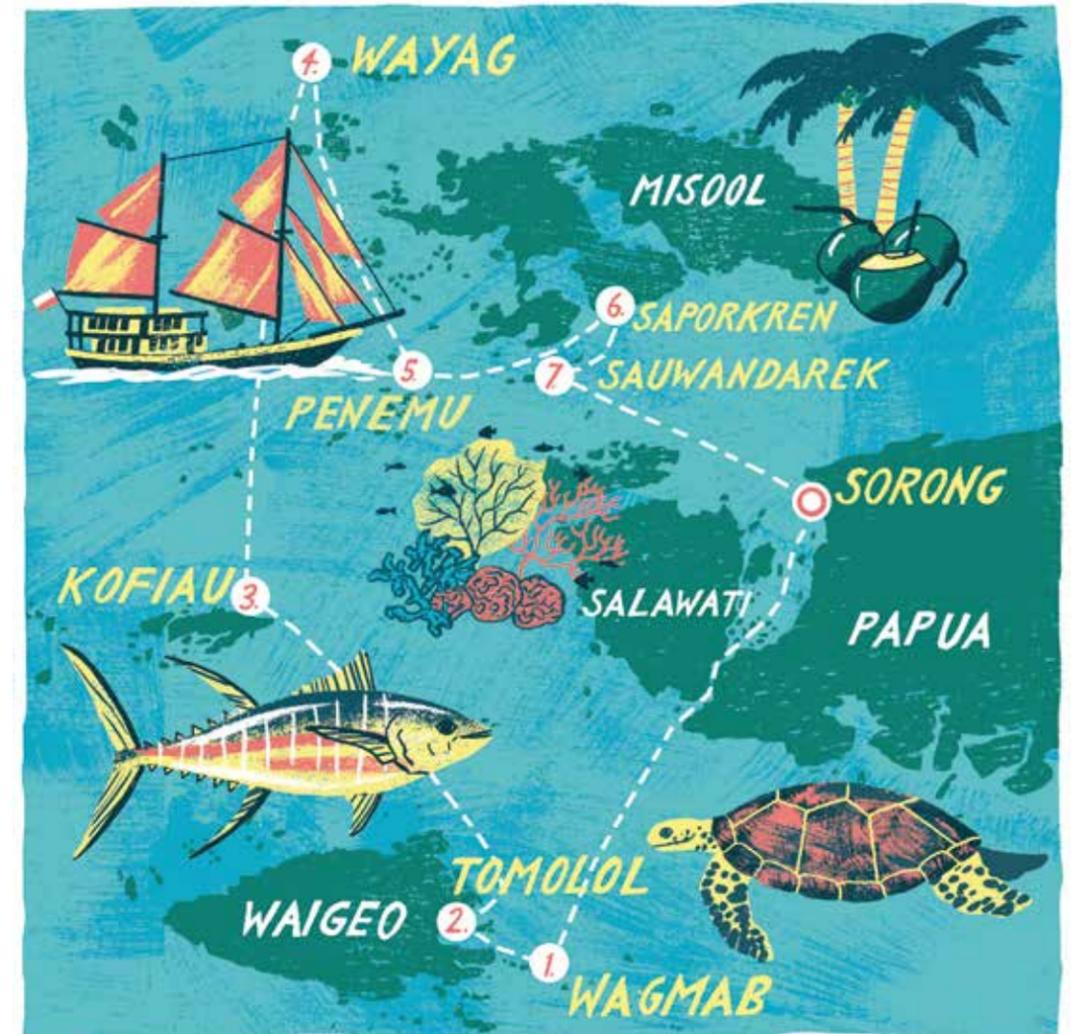
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BEAUTY SPOTS

The Campbells come ashore from the RIB (left). Above: prehistoric rock paintings on the island of Misool

ILLUSTRATION: TOM JAY. PHOTOGRAPHY: STEWART CAMPBELL



station, we're back among the sharks as baby blacktips circle our feet in three feet of water. When we get back on board, the crew, as ever, are lined up and waiting with towels and freshly-made juice.

Flavor turns out to be a big part of our charter – these are, after all, the spice islands. Chef Nyoman, who worked in Bali's best hotels before joining the crew of *Dunia Baru*, uses them to perfect a true fusion menu – one night it's local rendang curry, the next it's a traditional British beef dish. Each is superb, with presentation to match anything I've seen in the Med. There's so much variety at breakfast that you leave the table feeling guilty at the dishes you've left behind.

If an hour underwater isn't sufficient in each of the dive sites we visit, a week isn't enough to experience all the cruising Raja Ampat has to offer. On our last

afternoon we hoist the considerable rig and sail right into a nasty squall, which requires the crew to almost immediately drop sail in the pouring rain. It was the only ruffle – and a mild one at that – in what had been a dreamy week. Actually, there was one other – the fact we couldn't return home with any of the crew who had taken such superb care of the kids. ■

Dunia Baru is available in Raja Ampat from October to March for \$14,500 (plus 10 percent government tax) per night and in Komodo from April to October for \$13,500 (plus 10 percent government tax) per night. This includes fuel, crew, food, watersports, diving for certified divers and alcohol (unlimited beer, seven bottles of wine and two bottles of spirits daily). To charter *Dunia Baru*, contact 37South, 37southyachts.com

CHART A COURSE

The route the Campbells followed from Sorong, with several overnight passages between island stops