



Family Trip for the Bucket List

Trip Report by Andrew McEvoy. Photos by Hayley Baillie.

As a family with kids growing through their teenage years, we have made a pact: Let's take a holiday each year that is truly adventurous, memorable and worthy of our collective bucket list.

Not that there is anything wrong with theme parks, island resorts, beach shacks, buffet breakfasts or visiting the family for Christmas.

We simply wanted something we could all share, that was full of activity, a bit exotic and hard to explain. The trend pickers call this the experience economy – we called it family fun.

Spending two weeks on a "live aboard" boat in the pristine waters of Raja Ampat in the far eastern reaches of the Indonesian archipelago certainly satisfied our criteria.





The Seven Seas is a 45 metre traditionally built Buginese Schooner (built for comfort, not speed) and Raja Ampat is a chain of islands located in the Birds Head region of West Papua – closer to Papua New Guinea than the Indonesian capital, Jakarta.

It is made up of 1500 islands and surrounding reefs representing some of the richest marine biodiversity in the world – with more than 1300 species of native reef fish and 70% of the world's varieties of soft and hard coral.

Getting there is hard – three flights each way – a true test of family commitment.

Could sound boring and inaccessible right? Unless you are a serious marine biologist or dive aficionado in which case it needs no further explanation. Raja Ampat is the holy grail of the dive world.



But what's in it for a family? Or four families, in fact, as our group of 18 (eight adults and 10 kids) shared eight air conditioned state rooms over three decks serviced by an incredible crew of 17.

It is incredible adventure with creature comforts – "Boys Own Annual" exploration with great food, air conditioned cabins and an end of day massage if you so choose. Voted by the McEvoy family five as "the best holiday e-ver", it will be tough to top.

Ostensibly the live aboard boats are about diving. And this part of the trip was extraordinary.

But with such a diverse and varied group, this holiday had to be so much more. One of the parents, James, was quite insistent on this – and thank goodness. It meant we packed so much in, literally never a dull moment. James was also world's best at finding the perfect west facing beach for Sundowners every day at 5pm. Sundowner location finding is an art form and he is the Zen master.



Adult pleasures aside, what's in it for the kids? Try "skurfing" (ski-surfing from the back of the tenders); boat jumping, kayaking, village visits; hiking, cave exploration, movies, games and even the occasional afternoon nap.

We climbed to the top of island hills on rickety walking trails to reveal the most stunning scenery imaginable; were shown ceremonial burial sites where skulls and bones still lie; and saw local rock art to rival that of Arnhem Land or the Kimberley prompting the question of how connected these lands once were.

One of the keys to family success is the remote nature of this wonderland. There is no phone or Wi-Fi range and we banned the kids from using their devices for the 12 days. This led to some good, old fashioned fun including long forgotten card games and even a final night talent quest – where the crew produced harmonies only matched by their cohesion during the journey.



And then there is the main attraction of the underwater world – the clarity and diversity of which blew me away. Diving into the aquamarine, the fluorescent hard and soft corals provide the backdrop for a reef wonderland.



Diving at the famous Magic Mountain site, it felt like the animated opening scene of Finding Nemo where the reef is buzzing with the entire colour and movement the ocean boasts. The only thing missing was a large Reef Manta Ray to come and take all these kids to school (we did spot the Mantas later in the trip).

Our dive masters, Irwan and Jeffri, knew every location intimately and were masterful in spotting the weird and the wonderful on each excursion. And we were lucky to have not one, but two secret ingredients, which would not always be available to people who book this wonderful journey.

Part of our touring party was Mark Heighes – the owner and founder of the Sevensseas, his wife and Indonesian local Tuti and their kids Ben and Dan. Mark has been exploring this and other nearby regions for more than 20 years and is an original Live Aboard pioneer. His calm and assured nature, command of Bahasa and knowledge of the area (including west facing beaches) was of enormous value.

Mark is also the nephew of globally famous diver, film maker and conservationist Valerie Taylor, who with late husband Ron have spent more than 50 years exploring and understanding the ocean and its creatures.



Often noted for their expertise on sharks (Ron and Valerie helped film makers build an element of authenticity into films such as *Jaws*, *Orca* and *Sky Pirates*), Valerie Taylor is so much more. Travelling with us on the boat and going by the moniker "Aunty", she was exactly that: the most knowledgeable aunt you ever had.

Her command of the undersea environment and the ease with which she moves through it (at the age of 81) was an inspiration. And her patient willingness to share that knowledge gave us all more context and appreciation of this amazing undersea world.

Looking through my dive logs at journey's end, there is a list of discovered sea life that would satisfy the most ardent of dive enthusiasts: Parrotfish, trigger fish, long, skinny trumpet fish, cuttlefish, sweetlips, anemone Fish including clown fish; scorpion fish, stone fish, weird wobbegongs, lion fish, crustaceans, orangutang crab, octopus, moray and other eels, turtles and one very tiny pygmy seahorse.

Just off the reefs and into the blue we saw barracuda, sharks, manta rays; big schools of various varieties and jellyfish of all persuasions.

But most of all, we saw so much of each other – gadget free, curious and constantly motivated by the wonders of Raja Ampat.

Andrew McEvoy,
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