



## **My Seven Seas Voyage; 29 Jan to 10 Feb 2017**

*Trip Report by Jeremy Prince. Photos by Robert Delfs.*

It was 29 January 2017 when our party of 14 gathered around the baggage carousel in Sorong. From Bali were Jos & Lida, joint owners along with Captain Mark of the Seven Seas, Robert back with two new knees for his eighth voyage, this time with long-time friends from Los Angeles, and Jonathan and Victoria, fulfilling a dream 10 years in the making. From Jakarta came Maurice & Lina, joining up with April, their niece from New York, who had just 17 open water dives under her belt. Also from the US, Terry the ER doctor from Cincinnati; and Hector and Dave, long-time dive buddies from Portland, Oregon. There were three marine biologists from Australia: Richard and Mihaela from Port Douglas, and Jeremy from Fremantle. Meeting for the first time around the carousel, watching the black pelican cases pile higher and wondering what year and time of day it was, one thing became immediately clear, that two underwater photographers (Robert & Terry) had won the excess baggage award hands down.



Gear complements completed and baggage trolleys piled high, the friendly Seven Seas crew rounded us up and escorted us aboard, where we installed ourselves and were given an introductory briefing before cruising out of Sorong for a first check out dive. The Seven Seas newcomers amongst us spent that first afternoon marveling at the beautiful traditional lines of the vessel with upturned bow, the eight double cabins, with en-suite bathrooms, various areas for socializing and taking the breezes, and the great systems in place for everything. The highlight and the low point of that first afternoon was the whale with calf (possibly Bryde's whales) spotted feeding along a tide-line, but the low point was the floating piles of plastic trash marking the tide-lines closer into Sorong, and which we never totally escaped-so shocking and sad to have plastic debris counterpointing such beauty.

A couple of hours out of Sorong we anchored in *Teluk Markisa* (Passion Fruit Bay) and completed our initial check dive, after which, we settled in with the equatorial sun setting over the top deck for a first night getting to know each other over evening drinks. With evident pride, Captain Mark also introduced his crew - more of an extended family really - impressing us all with the deep long term relationships (20+ years) that hold the vessel together and make it such an enjoyable experience.

A highlight of the first few days was Yanggelo Island, southeast of Waigeo Island where Alfred Russel Wallace spent so much time. The anchorage was a pretty, sheltered channel between two islands; fringed with clear-water mangroves. Sea eagles, hornbills and cockatoos flying around maintained a constant, exotic soundscape. The surrounding dive sites were a fitting introduction to diving in Raja Ampat; drifting along the 100% living coral covered slopes of the channel, taking safety stops beneath the green canopy of the mangroves. Citrus Ridge with a school of barracuda, black tip sharks, turtles, coral camouflaged wobbegongs, morays, a school of friendly bumphead parrotfish, and the grass eels and blennies sharing holes with mantis shrimps along the sandy slopes. This was the first of successive dive sites to be popularly acclaimed "best dive site so far".



Personally, I most enjoyed Mayhem, an isolated lump out beyond the fringing reef. This is a great fish dive with a completely intact Indo-Pacific fish assemblage. All the big pelagic predators were



patrolling the blue water in schools as we drifted down on the light current: spanish mackerels; two species of barracuda; giant, bluefin and big eye trevallies; black tip sharks; big red bohar snappers and highfin coral groupers. Reaching the back of the lump, we worked our way back onto the top against the current through fields of brilliant corals. All the herbivores were also present: several rabbitfish species; bicolor, steephead and bumphead parrotfishes; along with the main reef predators, napoleon wrasses and square tail coral groupers. A very cool dive. I don't remember enjoying such an intact coral reef fish assemblage since 1990, when I spent a month diving through the Coral Sea. This was so unlike what I see all over the rest of Pacific now. That night it glassed off and inky reflections surrounded us as we toasted our great fortune from that spectacular top deck. Big eye trevallies were crashing the surface all around the boat through the evening, and before retiring someone shone a torch around revealing a multitude of fish eating bats skimming the surface catching small fish leaping to avoid being eaten by the trevally.

A one hour steam the next morning took us to Merpati Island in the Dampier Strait and the dive location called Manta Sandy. Manta rays feed in the strait; the dive site is a manta cleaning station. We had most success snorkeling with them as they fed amongst the shoals of fusilier, although one did turn up to the feeding station to dance on top of Robert who took maximum advantage with his camera. That day was capped by a pretty dive through the pilings of the Arborek Island jetty, amongst shoaling scad and a dizzying array of invertebrate life.



Steaming several hours south that night, brought us to Mark's secret anchorage hidden inside tiny Balbulol Island, to the south east of Misool Island. We had entered the classic rock islands of Raja Ampat, where sheer karst pinnacles drop straight into the ocean, and most of our dives became drifts along sheer walls festooned with big barrel sponges amongst soft and hard corals. Being only just past the new moon, the tides were still big, currents strong and the visibility not all we might have hoped for. But partly because of that, the fish life around Love Potion #9, the Plateau and J-Nose was spectacular and very approachable; the diversity of schooling fish bedazzling, but what stood out for me were the huge schools of pinjalo and mangrove snappers at depth around J-Nose. After diving, we relaxed paddling around the jagged, eroded limestone rock walls of Balbulol Island hung with pitcher plants and wild orchids.

After two days, we steamed further south to Boo Island, diving the isolated lump called Anchovy, and the iconic narrow ridge island which for obvious reasons is called Blue Windows. Sundowner drinks were taken to a small nearby island with a rare sandy beach, pigeons lekking in the trees behind us, and small black reef sharks chopping up silversides schooling along the beach provided entertainment for our benefit.



On the 5th of February, we pulled anchor early and steamed north to Shadow Reef - also known as Magic Mountain - for the first dive. The overcast conditions and less than perfect visibility had finally given way to sunny skies and crystal clear waters for the rest of the trip. The Magic Mountain dive simply blew us all away. The debate had ended; this was the best dive of the trip. The water was like crystal, a turtle greeted us upon entry, and schools of fusiliers, trevallies, barracuda and bohar snappers surrounded us the whole dive. Large Napoleon wrasse and camouflaged groupers prowled the midwater amongst the fusiliers. Jos, Lida, Mark and Richard saw a Giant Queensland Grouper at depth at the end of the ridge stretching out to the south, and an oceanic manta swam through. At the end of the dive, as we gathered on top of the lump for the mandatory safety stop, an inquisitive whale shark swam out of the depths and made multiple close passes checking out divers and tenders.



alike; at one stage swimming right through the middle of the dive party hanging like so much fruit from the surface. Check out the video link. As Captain Mark said after the dive; "It doesn't come any better than this". The afterglow of that first dive lasted through the day making it hard to remember the other dives: Nudi Rock and Twin Peaks, but on any other day we would have raved about them as well.



Early the next day, we steamed to Darum Island for a first dive on the Candy Store, another pinnacle with a couple of protruding rocks (one with a nice window), clear blue water, sheer life covered walls, friendly schools of batfish and feeding bumphead parrotfish. Then Andiamo for a second dive; beautiful coral covered ridges running off from another surface rock, and finally Warna-Warni, a small rock island with spectacular front wall and schools of patrolling trevallies, fusiliers and batfish. We pulled anchor in the afternoon and headed back east for another dive on Magic Mountain all hoping for a second whale shark encounter. From the topdeck we enjoyed a beautiful calm sunset and evening.

The first dive the next morning was at Eagle's Nest. One dive party saw a school of 60-70 pelagic mobula rays and a 2-meter long Giant Queensland Grouper. A couple of divers saw a pod of bottlenose dolphins cruise past them at depth, picking food off the bottom, shafts of morning sunlight glinting off them. Magic Mountain was 'only' spectacular the second time around, with all its fish life and the oceanic manta visiting us once again, but there was no repeat visit by the whale shark. Lightning did not strike twice in the same place. By this stage, all the dive sites (except Magic Mountain) were starting to run together in a blur of blue water walls, soft and hard corals, fusiliers, jacks and coral groupers, but the last full day of diving still stood out; a fishy morning dive on Four



Kings, and two drifts through the passage called Neptune's Fantasy, a final colorful coral and fan filled wall, packed full of little intimate cameos of everyday life in a tropical sea.



The sad end to our dive program came on the morning of 9th February. We spent the final day off-gassing, drying out gear, climbing a small peak around Misool Island for spectacular views out over an archipelago of rock islands and blue holes, checking out a rock art site, and visiting a massive cave system. Then there was a final farewell sunset and dinner on that top deck as the Seven Seas turned back towards Sorong, thanks were given to the entire crew had had made us feel so welcome and kept us safe, and who in turn pulled out their musical instruments and serenaded us back towards our respective homes.

Jeremy Prince,  
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