

RO THE NIGHTLY AM

March 14, 2026

THE FORGOTTEN ARCHIPELAGO

Raja Ampat – where the oceans run wild



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Ottolenghi In Amsterdam

A blueprint for Eden

In Raja Ampat – the most biodiverse marine ecosystem on Earth – Aqua Blu offers low-slung expedition luxury across kaleidoscopic and rousing reefs





NATASHA DRAGUN

If the ocean has a control centre, it's here.

Raja Ampat isn't just beautiful, it's outrageous. At the meeting point of the Pacific and Indian oceans, this Indonesian archipelago compresses more marine life into one region than anywhere else on Earth.

More than 3000 species of fish and about 500 types of coral — roughly 75 per cent of the world's known total. Scientists call it the epicentre of marine biodiversity. What that means in real terms? Chaos. Colour. Motion.

Drop beneath the surface and the reef doesn't unfold gently, it detonates. Sharks thread through schooling barracuda. Wobbegongs sprawl like patterned rugs with gills. Electric-blue damselfish pulse against coral walls that glow in sherbet shades of violet and flame.

At Cape Kri — which holds a world record for most marine species recorded in a single dive — life arrives from every direction at once. It's spectacular.

Exploring this liquid labyrinth aboard Aqua Blu, the 15-cabin expedition yacht operated by Aqua Expeditions, feels like having a front-row seat to the planet's most intricate performance. The ship itself is a former British naval explorer vessel, now stripped back and refined. Teak decks, wide picture windows, a palette of sand and stone that never competes with the view.

Days aboard the ship begin with currents and co-ordinates. Dive master Kaz — ex-Aman, 3000 dives deep in these waters — reads the sea like sheet music.



At Melissa's Garden, twin coral bommies surge with life, anemones trembling, orange whip coral flickering in the current, clouds of anthias scattering like confetti. At Yeben Shallows, manta rays circle a cleaning station in slow, deliberate loops, prehistoric and utterly unbothered by our presence.

Then there are the snorkelling drifts, weightless passages over reef shelves where turtles cruise past and black-tipped reef sharks materialise from the blue nothingness. The water hovers around 28C year-round, and visibility stretches into infinity. There are no jet skis. No high-rises. No flotillas of day boats.

Above the surface, Raja Ampat is just as theatrical. Limestone karsts rise like dragon spines from turquoise lagoons. At dawn on Gam Island, we trek into dense jungle to watch the red bird of paradise perform its mating ritual, plumes flaring gold and crimson as it pivots and leaps in the canopy.

Later, we kayak through limestone corridors where the water mirrors the sky, between coral bommies visible metres below.

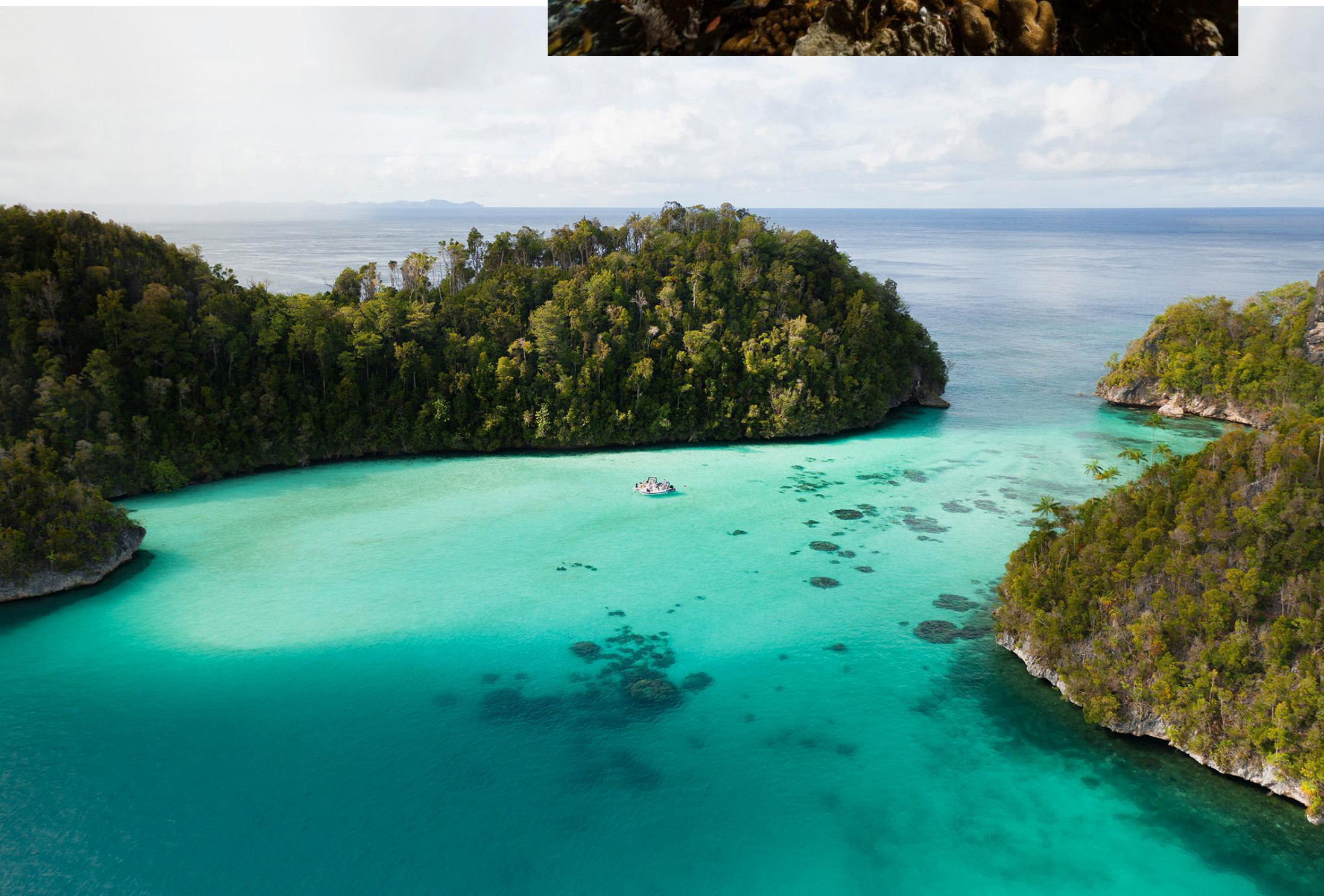
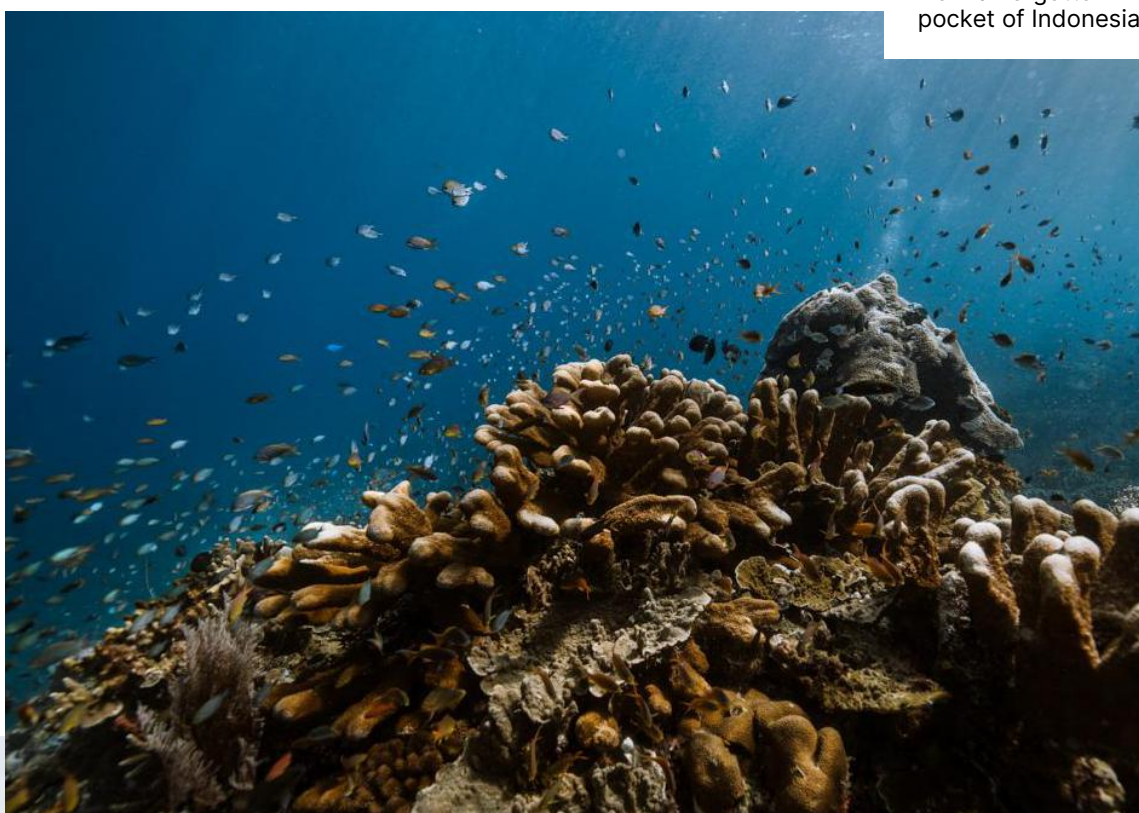
At Kali Biru, a hidden aquamarine river reached by longboat and muddy rainforest trail, we float on our backs beneath a cathedral of green, rain tapping the surface in silver pinpricks. It's the kind of moment that strips life back to essentials.

Back on board, cabins are quietly indulgent. ROAM's holds a deep tub, picture windows, crisp linens and a sofa so snug we can barely pull away.

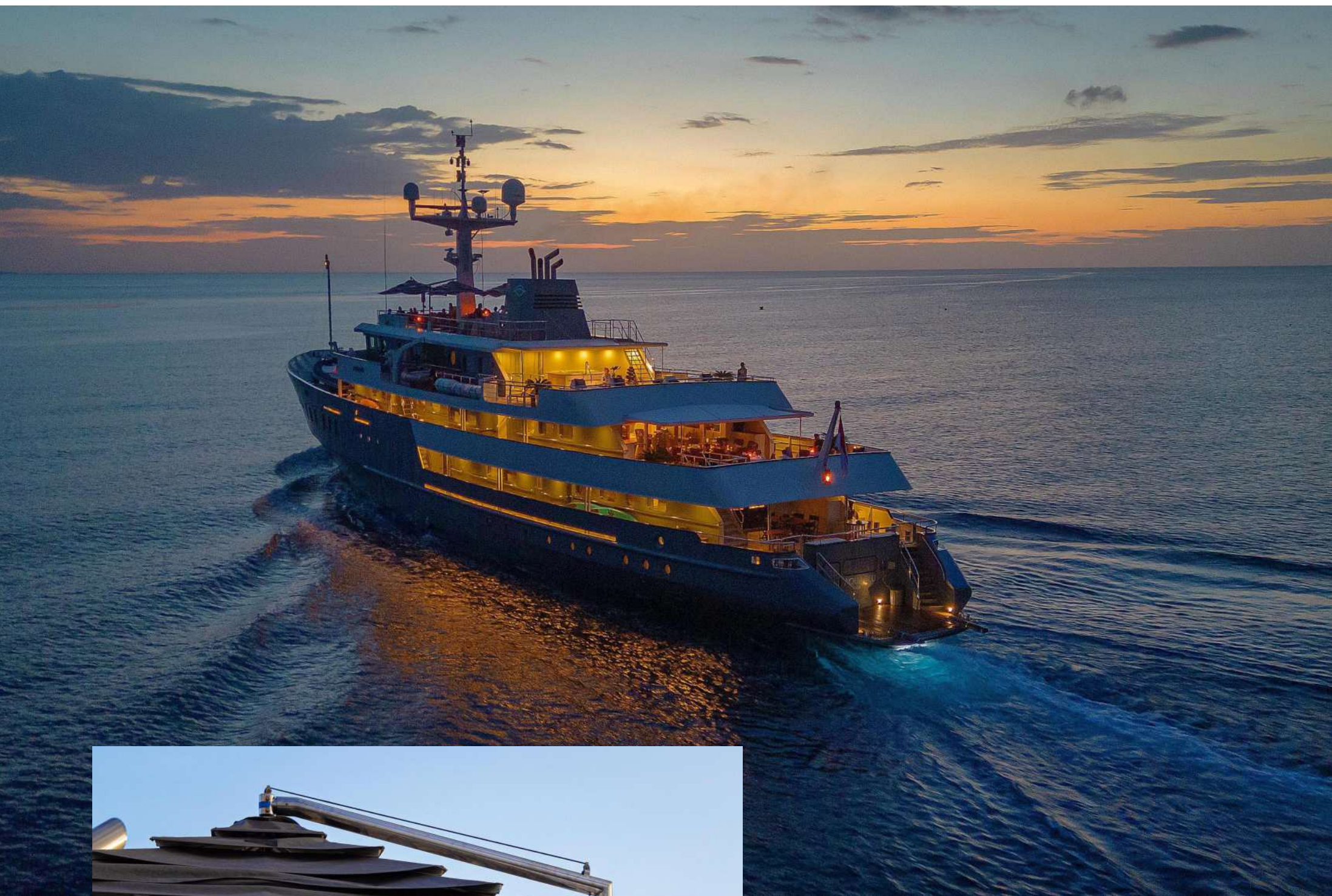
There's Indonesian coffee poured at sunrise on the upper deck and negronis at dusk as karsts dissolve into silhouette.



Aquatic moments from a 'forgotten' pocket of Indonesia.







One evening, anchored off Wofoh Island, the crew transform a remote beach into a torch-lit pop-up bar, with Bintang on ice, canapes drifting past, director's chairs angled towards a horizon that feels entirely ours.

Meals nod to the region's spice-route lineage; snapper in lemongrass broth, steamed grouper with ginger and Shaoxing, sambals bright with lime and chilli. Breakfast brings dragonfruit, papaya and yet more strong Balinese coffee. There are cooking demonstrations and conversations that veer from reef ecology to ancestral sea spirits believed to inhabit these waters.

Raja Ampat is often described as a last frontier. That framing misses the point. This isn't untouched wilderness waiting to be discovered, it's a living system operating at full tilt – intricate, ancient and wildly productive.

Aqua Blu simply places you inside it. And when you surface from a dive, heart racing, salt drying on your skin, you understand the real luxury on offer.

It's not excess. It's not spectacle staged for effect. Rather, it's access to a reef at its most explosive, to silence unbroken by engines, to a corner of the planet still functioning exactly as it should.

aquaexpeditions.com





Peerless, small-ship sailing aboard Aqua Blu



