

Raja Ampat Islands, West Papua, Indonesia

Birds-of-paradise, tropical sea critters, lesbians and general wildlife watching on the islands of Waigeo, Urai, Gam, Mansuar, Arborek, Kri, Painemu and Friwen – and a little birding at Sorong, West Papua

10th November to 2nd December 2014

Barry-Sean Virtue and Steve Anyon-Smith



Short Summary

Raja Ampat is strongly recommended. You will see Wilson's and red birds-of-paradise if you want to badly enough, along with a range of other desirable birds, as well as a few mammals. The snorkelling is good, although I'm told it's even better at other times of the year. The West Papuan people, pretty much the only "Indonesians" you are likely to encounter, are gentle and rather wonderful.

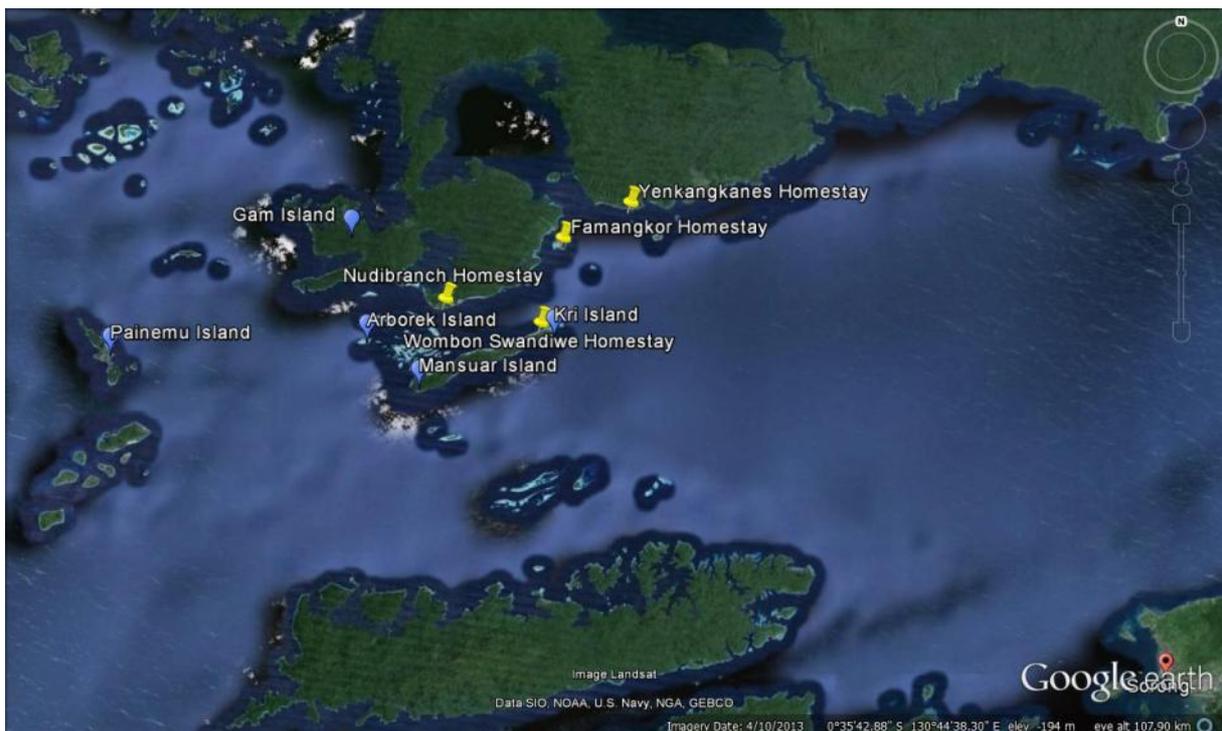
If you don't visit Painemu Island, you will have stuffed up badly. If you have lesbians at home, you may not need to bring them with you.

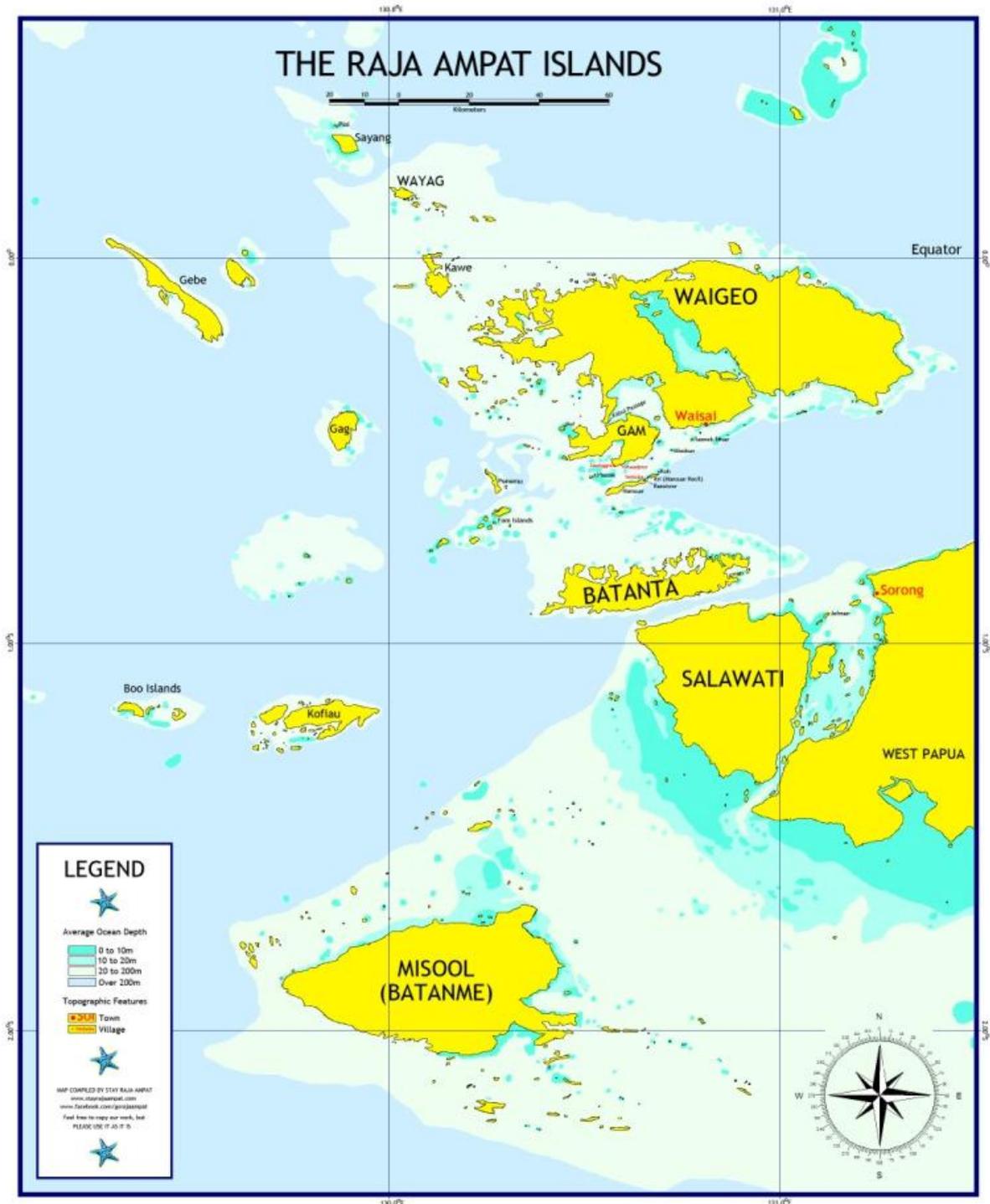
The Plan

The Raja Ampat Islands, see maps below, lie to the west of mainland "New Guinea". They claim the highest diversity of fish and coral species on the planet. Over 1500 finny things have been described to date. One of the most spectacular birds to be found anywhere – Wilson's bird-of-paradise, is found nowhere else.

The plan was to spend our time birding, snorkelling and chatting to the natives on a number of different islands. Barry-Sean Virtue was once more my travel companion. Although lesbians played no part in the original plan, joining us in the islands for much of our holiday were Kanako and Annie, a joyful couple from New York, Vietnam, Melbourne and Japan. Don't ask.

Likewise we hadn't planned to spend time in and around the City of Sorong on the mainland. We are glad that we did so.





Itinerary

We stayed at four homestays (see Google Earth map, above) and a number of other places:

- Makassar, Sulawesi, two nights, in transit, one at each end of the holiday
- Yenkanganes Homestay, Waigeo Island, five nights
- Nudibranch Homestay, Gam Island, six nights
- Wombon Swandiwe Homestay, Kri Island, three nights
- Famangkor Homestay, Friwen Island, three nights

- JE Meridien Hotel, Sorong, West Papua, three nights
- Denpasar, Bali, for a day in transit on the way home

West Papuan People

Indonesian New Guinea was forcibly annexed from The Netherlands in 1969. Many are not happy about it.

Apparently the indigenous folk in the Raja Ampats prefer to be called West Papuans. These fine people comprise the vast majority of the population on the islands most visited by tourists.

The predominant religion is Christianity, often combined with traditional beliefs - or none.

All the West Papuans we met, except one – the manager of Wombon Swandiwe Homestay - were charming, gentle, honest and welcoming. They were fun to be with. They smile almost constantly and never appear threatening, even if they are actively setting fire to your homestay, but I'm getting ahead of myself here.



Somewhat surprisingly the locals are quite punctual when it comes

to fulfilling obligations made much earlier, like half an hour ago – or even the day before. They were as likely to arrive or to be ready early rather than late. I think they've been coached. This is surely not normal for island communities.

West Papuans never seemed to think there was anything odd about the activities we engaged in, like getting up at 0400 to climb a mountain to see birds at sunrise, or looking at wildlife in or out of the water without killing it. Whether they understand lesbians is moot.

One thing I kept noticing – Raja Ampat didn't feel like Indonesia. It felt like an unknown watery part of New Guinea, with extra rubbish.

Sorong, on the mainland, has seen much immigration from other Indonesian islands. I'm not commenting on the politics of this, but suffice to say that the non-West Papuans I met were

friendly and honest too. I didn't note any tension in the streets or markets of Sorong, but it was clear that there were two distinct groups – West Papuans and 'others'.

Staying in Sorong automatically signs you up for a compulsory 0400 or so wake-up call from the local mosque(s).....

Weather

Raja Ampat is so close to the equator that sometimes water won't go down drains at all, let alone struggle with which way to spiral (yeah, I know....). This also means that weather systems go about their business in a decidedly languid fashion. Storm systems move slowly and erratically and sometimes not at all.

Most of the time it was dry, temperature 30 degrees and close to 100% humidity. The nights would cool eventually, to the extent that many of the locals would be wearing their only jacket in the early mornings. As we were in and out of the water and sleeping close to or over it, I didn't find the weather too draining at all.

It rained heavily a few times – mostly at night. Distant thunderstorms made for spectacular sunsets.



Safety and Security

The islands, and presumably Sorong, are very safe to visit, even for women travelling alone. Or so I'm told. Or women travelling together.....

Some of the tourists we intersected with were another matter. Aside from the exemplary behaviour exhibited by our new friends Annie and Kanako, a few of the others might consider changing their medication or visiting places more in keeping with their personalities, like North Korea or Guantanamo Bay. When asked "How's it goin' mate?", one English chap replied "I'm not at all happy." No further explanation was offered. Another charmer, this time German (?), abused the living bejesus out of me for standing up on some coral rubble. I'd met the dreaded coral gestapo!

Strange tourists can largely be avoided if you remove Kri Island from your itinerary.

We didn't hear of anyone who had anything stolen.

Food

Many of the folk that comment on-line about their experiences at Raja Ampat homestays seem obsessed with what they put into their mouths. Okay, the food can be rather repetitive, I get that. What do you think would be on the menu on fairly isolated islands with little or no refrigeration and surrounded on all sides by fish? And what would you expect for ~\$US30 a day full board?

Importantly the food was healthy, had all the major food groups except pork crackling and chocolate, and if one particular homestay is avoided (see "Notes on Accommodation", below), you probably won't have any problems confusing your digestive system.

The homestay owners will do their very best to serve you good food to the best of their abilities and it will be as varied as the local produce allows. There is endless free tea, coffee and drinking water.

Pretty much every lunch and dinner will have rice and fish in it, unless you complain about maggoty fish, in which case it goes off the menu to be replaced by eggs. Good news for both reasons! This only happened once and is atypical for the islands I understand. In any event it shouldn't happen at all if you stay at homestays that belong to the Raja Ampat Local Homestay Business Enterprise Association (see below).

Most meals include green vegetables and / or carrots and potato. Bananas are the only common fruit, plus papayas, mangoes and oranges if you're lucky.

Getting back to the fish; it is a good idea to eat all the fish presented at meal times. Alternatively you can surreptitiously feed any excess to the 'homestay dog' or hurl it back into the sea. This will usually prevent the same fish being re-presented as your next meal.....

Beer

Now, this is very important. A 500ml can of Bintang beer in a grog shop in Sorong costs 20,000 rupiah (IDR) or about \$A1.90. Beer on Waigeo Island doesn't cost anything. There isn't any; at least not at Saporkren Village, the only village near any of the homestays. On Gam Island in Sawinggrai Village it will cost a very reasonable 50,000 IDR, and what's more, you'll be happy to pay it! Dependent on whether a villager felt motivated enough to start the town generator, the Bintang might even be cold.

Beer, cold, can be purchased at Yenkoranu Homestay on Kri Island for 50,000 IDR. I would recommend Yenkoranu as a place to stay if Kri was on your 'island list'. Having learnt about the paucity of beer on Waigeo, we took beer from Kri to Friwen Island. It was as well that we did. I suspect none can be found there in its natural habitat (fridges).

"Stayrajaampat.com" and the Raja Ampat Local Homestay Business Enterprise Association

The best website I've ever seen is <http://www.stayrajaampat.com/ultimate-raja-ampat-guide/> I wouldn't have gone on this trip if I hadn't discovered it. Everything you could possibly want to know about travel in Raja Ampat while staying at homestays is on this website. It is less useful if you wish to visit the islands on what we called 'pirate ships'. These



are the many dive and general tourist live-aboard yachts – that rarely ever use sails – that ply the islands. They cost lots of \$\$\$.

The 'Homestay Association' has been set up, inter alia, to provide minimum standards for visitors and develop skills for homestay operators. It seems

to achieve the aims set for it. What is most encouraging is the spirit of co-operation amongst its members. After all, if you transfer from one homestay to the next, the homestay owners will come into direct contact with each other. Instead of trying to club each other to death for stealing each other's business, these guys show genuine friendship and usually take the opportunity to chew the fat over the price of petrol, stock indices, and rumours of possible lesbian sightings.

Notes on Accommodation

General: All of the homestays have a generator for night lighting and the charging of devices. They also provide free drinking water, tea, coffee and boiled water. Mosquito nets are standard above bedding. Beds have a sheet and pillow and are kept clean.

Yenkangkanes Homestay, near Saporkren, Waigeo Island

Cost: 350,000 IDR full board per person. Contact person: Florens +6285244587691

We were the only visitors during our five night stay. The food was the best we had in the islands. Margaretha was inventive and the food was varied. She would deliver hot snacks in



the afternoon, and the fruit bowl was never exhausted.

Our rooms were on a two-room structure built over the water. The bathroom served its purpose but that's about all.

Florens is charming and friendly and speaks fairly good English. Her extended family includes Benny Mambrasar, a good

birding guide who can show you Wilson's and red birds-of-paradise from his hides for a very reasonable cost (200,000 and 100,000 IDR respectively). He knows the calls of all the larger forest birds.

As Waigeo is the biggest island in the Raja Ampat group there is a greater variety of birds here. Aside from the logging roads leading uphill to the bird-of-paradise sites, the Waisai Road is also very birdy for the more common forest birds. So if birding is your thing, Yenkangkanes is the place to stay.

There is reasonable snorkelling off the front of the homestay with good corals and a fair range of fish, including bumphead parrotfish.

Boat trips can be organised to other birding and snorkelling sites.

The homestay has an aspect that allows perfect sunset viewing.

Highly recommended.

Nudibranch Homestay, near Sawinggrai Village, Gam Island

Cost: 350,000 IDR full board per person. Contact person: Paulus +6282198667199

We stayed with Paulus for six nights. The food was okay and served in a lovely location overlooking mangroves. It was buried in semi-tame cuscuses at night.

Our rooms had en-suite facilities with a western-style toilet (without a western-style flushing mechanism...). The rooms face a small lagoon and mangroves along with a view towards open water. New ones are under construction.

Paulus speaks fairly good English. He is a cheerful and well organised chap who has great plans for the future. His guides are skilled and obliging. We used them to see western crowned pigeon and to discover the trail network for our future use sans guide! He has an excellent boat for excursions and his excursion prices are reasonable, and somewhat negotiable.

The “house reef” is very good. We saw lots of quirky things here that we weren’t to see elsewhere, including the ‘walking shark’. A seemingly resident shoal of big-eye trevally rafts up off the nearby Mambefor Homestay jetty.



For birds, there is a fabulous network of trails just behind the village. There are great birds right from the start and a red bird-of-paradise display site within an easy 20 minute walk. There are also a good range of birds in the grounds of the homestay.

There is a lovely orchid garden within the trail network behind the village. The village itself and its occupants were a highlight of the trip. Happy children played in the ‘street’ and in the sea. Village life could be enjoyed along with a Bintang from local shops.

Highly recommended.

Wombon Swandiwe Homestay, Kri Island

Cost: 350,000 IDR full board per person. Contact person: don't stay here!

This homestay is not a member of the Homestay Association.

This is a new homestay with good facilities – great toilet and shower and good bungalows on the water's edge. The view is lovely.

The food is okay when you don't have to share it with the tame and very brave rats or the offspring of flies. It also paid not to eat after-dinner treats as these were often the next day's breakfast. Of the four of us (we had merged with Annie and Kanako by this stage), three had gut problems from the food here.

Henke, the manager, is also a rat. He speaks good English. He was placed on this planet to



run scams on visitors. In every quoted cost, whether it be for the purchase of beer, the price of accommodation, or boat hire or transfer fees, there is an inbuilt "Henke tax". Often the first quoted price for something could be up to four times the ultimate or reasonable cost. Henke was the only islander I grew to

dislike. We all left Wombon Swandiwe days earlier than we'd planned on account of him.

The snorkelling off the homestay – or any homestay on Kri Island actually – is very good.

Birding is limited. I found a trail leading into the forest at the northern (or western) end of Mambrasar Guesthouse (also owned by Henke's family – be warned). This was good for birds and would have been revisited if we hadn't decided to bail.

Homestay to be avoided. Not recommended. Yenkoranu is probably the best bet – cold beer, nice staff and a range of accommodation options.

Famangkor Homestay, Friwen Island

Cost: 330,000 IDR full board per person. Contact person: Yopi +6285254552269

Yopi and Helen and their family were very keen to please. They were very attentive, obliging and charming. Although they speak very little English, this wasn't a problem.

The food was good and plentiful. They offered a wide variety of fresh fruit. The "coffee sticks" were much nicer than the coffee grounds offered elsewhere. The beds in the one-room bungalow were the best we slept on during our holiday.

Birding is very limited on Friwen. This small island has forest, but this is largely comprised of very old exotic fruit trees like mango and breadfruit. There are a range of birds but all of them can be seen on the other islands.

The snorkelling at Friwenbomba Wall (the island opposite the homestay) is excellent for strange sea-life we didn't see anywhere else, e.g. mantis shrimp, pipefish, colourful nudibranchs and various sponges and corals. However you need boat transport to get there. I swam over on one occasion but it's just a little too far and the tidal currents could see you washed up on a different continent.

Likewise, the snorkelling off the homestay is okay if the tide is not racing too fast.

A short and rather beautiful walk links the homestay with Friwen Village.

By the time you read this Yopi's boat will have sunk so he should have a new one.

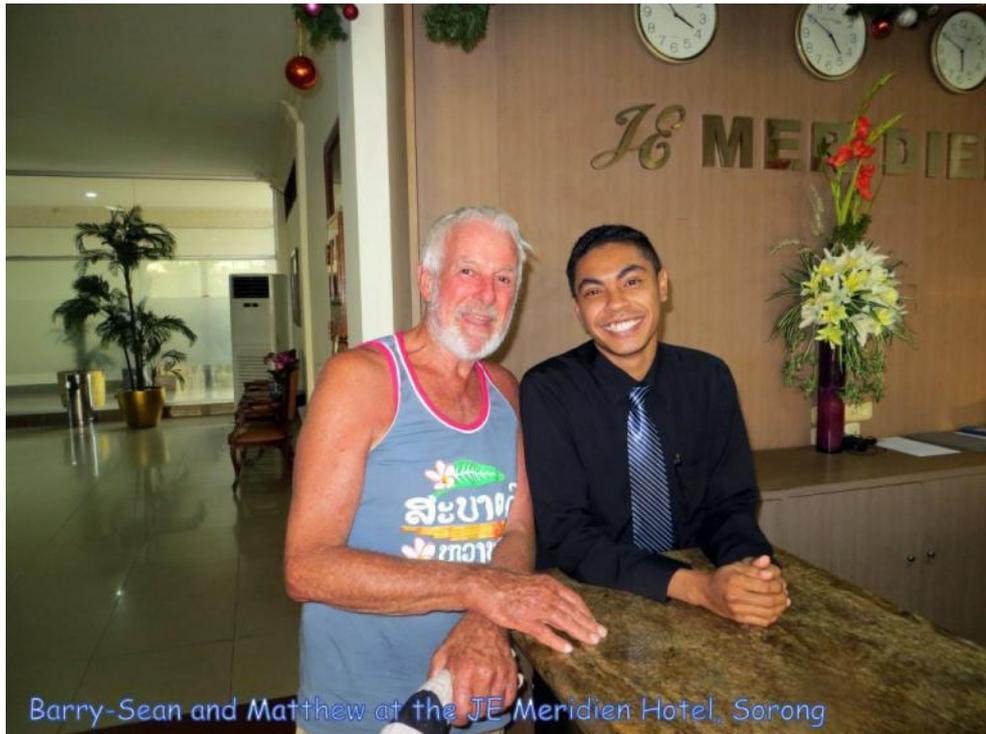


Recommended. Limited activity options.

JE Meridien Hotel, opposite Sorong Airport, Sorong

Cost: 594,000 IDR per twin including full breakfast. Contact: jemeridien.sorong@yahoo.com or hotel booking websites.

This is a good hotel and conveniently located across the road from the airport, to and from which the hotel runs a free taxi service. This is important if it's bucketing with rain... The rooms are very good and everything works. The reception has English-speaking staff on hand and the café has good meals and cold beer! Our stay, for three nights, was a very pleasant one.



The hotel is on the side of town closest to the nearest good forest – Taman Wisata Alam Sorong a.k.a. “Hutong Lindu”. This is apparently a national park – without any staff or funding. It is extremely good for seeing birds. Over 50 were identified over two consecutive mornings.

Highly recommended.

Transport

There is a road in Raja Ampat. It connects Waisai with nothing whatsoever, near to, but not at, Saporkren Village. Its existence can be interpreted by quite a few trees going missing anywhere near it. It carries very little traffic and for all intents and purposes it can be ignored after you have transferred from Waisai to Yenkangkanes.

All other transport is restricted to watercraft and legs. I guess you could swim between some of the islands at a pinch, or, as we pondered on occasion, if the watercraft you happened to be a passenger on, sank.

Sorong and Waisai are connected by a very fast, comfortable and cheaply priced ferry service. The departure times are a bit wobbly and seem to change on a regular basis so don't trust anything you read off the internet – ask when you arrive in Sorong. Rather sadly, a new, intrusive and arguably unnecessary airport is being built on Waigeo. This will prevent many visitors to the region from being able to tell their friends that they've been to Sorong – more on this later.



Sorong to Waisai fast ferry

The fast ferries are in contrast to many of the other boats in the islands. Some of these are quite modern, most have outboard motors and most don't sink each night. One of the dugouts we used threatened to do just that, although the owner went to some effort to cover up this sad reality by bailing it nocturnally.

For reasons that we never quite got to the bottom of, boat transport between the islands and for day trips is quite expensive. This is why you should try to link up with lesbians as a cost defraying measure, if nothing else. Petrol is said to be locally expensive but the hire costs were a multiple of the fuel cost, so that's not the whole story. In any event, the overall cost of staying in Raja Ampat dilutes the moderately high boat hire fees. These fees are negotiable, yet another reason for having your own lesbians. Ours were quite skilled at this sort of thing. If all else fails you are welcome to go to rival homestays and try to use their boat(s).



getting the Titanic reading for Waisai

Lifejackets were often seen to hang in trees, but never in boats. Methinks it would be a grave insult to a boat owner to suggest the transfer of a life jacket from a tree to a boat. I took the precaution on one transfer to blow up an inflatable pillow inside my pack just in case....

On the mainland in Sorong, transport is primarily by shared taxi and these are inexpensive. On one 14km trip I tipped the driver double the fare + paid for the West Papuan couple next to me, and all for less than \$A2. This made for four very happy people for less than 50c each!

Insects and other pests

We took doxycycline as an antimalarial. This was probably unnecessary at the time of our visit. Dawn and dusk mosquitoes were rare or absent. Most of the forests were mozzie-free. In the few cases that weren't, repellent was certainly needed. We found no leeches, ticks or flies-that-want-to-live-in-your-eyes. The only other pests are discussed under "Safety and Security", above.

The Environment

The forests of Raja Ampat are in good shape. Thankfully clear-felling is thus far not a happening thing on the islands (unless you're building an airport). Some selective industrial logging has occurred on Waigeo. The flip side is that the logging roads allow access to the bird-of-paradise display sites. Slash and burn agriculture has taken place along the Waisai to Nowhere road. In otherwise primary forest selective logging has taken place by villagers for house construction. This would appear to be sustainable.

Trapping, generally by snares, of large terrestrial birds, e.g. western crowned pigeon and dusky megapode, is widespread. I suspect that areas close to villages and waterways are the most impacted, but I don't really know. Megapodes are still very common everywhere and western crowned pigeons are still present and likely to be more common away from human access points.

Rubbish is another matter. Rafts of plastic can be found on beaches on the remotest islands and sometimes at sea! Indonesia is famous for its rubbish – the worst I have seen in any country – even the Philippines. It was heartening to see at least one village doing something.

Paulus, the owner of Nudibranch Homestay on Gam Island has organised the kids in the neighbouring village of Sawinggrai to undertake a weekly rubbish clean-up. I also noticed an ex-pat whitey on Kri walking the beach with a large bag picking up plastics.





Sadly there may not be much hope for the future. We watched a homestay staff member throwing plastic into the sea. And while waiting at Saporkren village for our homestay to buy fuel I flicked some plastic bags out of the water and high onto the beach. People laughed.

Wildlife

Birds seen and site notes – see table

Over 250 birds have been recorded for the Raja Ampat Islands. As most of the islands are 'land-bridge islands' – that is, they were attached to the mainland as recently as 8,000 years ago, the bird fauna is quite diverse. We used the second edition of Pratt and Beehler's *The Birds of New Guinea*, which covers the islands. This proved to be an excellent and informative guide.

Most birders go to Raja Ampat to see Wilson's and red birds-of-paradise (BOPs). These can both be seen on Waigeo, with red also easy to find on Gam. Wilson's is also on Batanta Island but is apparently less easy to see there.

After the BOPs, my wish list extended to western crowned pigeon, brown-headed crow and then the rest. There are sites for the pigeon but the crow is a matter of luck.

Most of the see-able birds at any site anywhere in the world will usually be found during the first full day in the field. This is particularly true for Raja Ampat. In broad terms there are two types of birds – large, fairly common and obvious open space and treetop birds (pigeons, doves, hornbills, parrots and cockies, some honeyeaters, raptors etc) and "inside

the forest” birds. The latter will not be seen while walking along roads. They take a lot of time, patience and luck. And rule #1 – they don’t want to be seen.

On Waigeo, Benny Mambrasar is a great guide. He lives in Saporkren Village but can be contacted through Yenkangkanes Homestay or texted on +6285244871706. The sites for the ‘BOPs’ require a moderate degree of fitness and a willingness to walk uphill on gravelly ex-logging roads (that will not age well) in the dark. This offers spotlighting opportunities!! Barry-Sean is 77 and he made it, so you’ve got no excuses. It would be possible to walk to the sites yourself, but as Benny (or no doubt other guides) built and maintain the hides – and found the display sites in the first place – this would be a bit daft.

It would be theoretically possible to visit both BOP sites on the one day, but what’s the rush? If you did so, it would make sense not to miss the Wilson’s, as red is a fairly common forest bird.

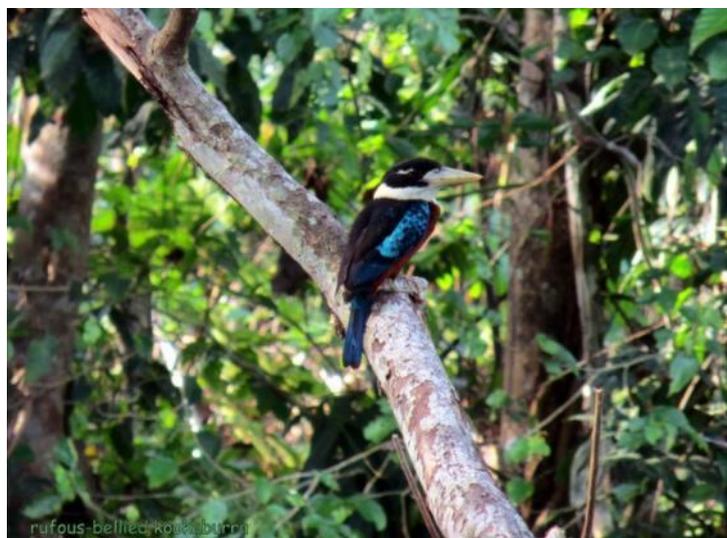


The best mixed flock of small passerines we found was on the trail leading to the red BOP site.

Also on Waigeo there is a site for western crowned pigeon. Benny and Arnold from Yenkangkanes Homestay can take you there by boat. Arnold appears to own the land around the site so other homestay owners may not be able to take you there. I saw the bird but they are not

guaranteed. Brown-headed crows were also seen at this beautiful site. On the return to the homestay is Urai Island, a good place for snorkelling.

On Gam we saw fewer birds than on Waigeo, despite the fact that the islands are almost connected. This may simply be due to the habitats being subtly different. The network of trails behind Sawinggrai Village on Gam gave excellent access to a range of habitats. Western crowned pigeon was seen twice (and probably flushed on another occasion), so these are doing okay despite hunting pressure. The sites are a half hour



walk from the village. Just ask Paulus at Nudibranch Homestay. After you walk around with his guide you can return by yourself later – nobody seems to care. Red BOPs are easy here. Other good birds included great-billed parrot and the more common Moluccan king-parrot.

Kri Island harbours less birds than Gam. This is to be expected. It is a smallish island at around 3km long. Nevertheless there are islet monarchs and island whistlers inside this heavily forested island. Getting inside the forest is another matter. Be assured that every ridge and most gullies will have a trail along them.

Friwen Island is not really good for birds – although if this was the only place you birded and you'd never been to the area before, you'd still love it!

At Sorong we birded at two sites. After we found the second one the first, Macbon, can happily be ignored.

At the 14km marker on the main drag south-east of Sorong, with an entrance adjacent to the main road, is a vast forest. It is named Taman Wisata Alam Sorong or locally as "Hutong Lindu". You can get a blue share taxi here for less than a dollar from Sorong. You need to say "Hutong Lindu" to the driver.

A concrete archway over the entrance road, resplendent with painted Blyth's hornbills, describes the site as a national park – nicely abandoned at the time of my visit. A road runs for at least a few kilometres through excellent regrowth and primary forest. There are lots of good birds here – see the list of seen birds – and there were lots of others calling that I didn't see or identify. Put simply, this was the best birding location on the trip. There is almost no traffic on the road than runs into the park. The forest continues well past the point where you've run out of quality birding time as you walk along.



An added bonus is that there are hardly any people about. I birded by myself and felt quite safe and relaxed. If you wish to have local company, contact John Urbon, a lovely West



Papuan chap and he will arrange to take you there for a sensible donation. John's number is +6282238444120.

Other Wildlife

Mammals are never easy on islands where hunting pressure is ever-present and has been for tens of thousands

of years. There is some good news. Wild Waigeo cuscuses (four individuals at the moment) come to be fed at Nudibranch Homestay at dusk – or sometimes during the day. I saw them twice in nearby forest as well.

Bottlenosed dolphins were seen on two occasions hunting next to drop-offs off Waigeo and Gam islands. Sugar gliders were seen and heard on the BOP trail on Waigeo. What a bastard, travelling all that way to see the same mammal that infests Royal National Park at home.



Some really nice bats were seen on Gam. Paulus at the homestay can show you these:

- Cenderawasih Bay flying fox. One or two of these unusual beasties – that roost alone, low inside the rainforest, were seen hovering at flowers at night in the homestay grounds. One was flushed at the western crowned pigeon site. A large

roost of other flying foxes (probably blacks) was said to occur nearby but we didn't go there.

- Beaufort's naked-backed fruit bat. A hundred or so roost inside a cave in Gam Lagoon.



- Raffray's sheath-tailed bat. We managed several of these in a side tunnel inside the water cave in Gam Lagoon. This is near the Beaufort's naked-backed fruit bat site and an excursion to see both – as well as some good snorkelling – can be combined into one trip.



A large and quite fabulous scrub (or amethystine) python was spotted by Barry-Sean on Gam at the western crowned pigeon site, after three of us walked within half a metre of it without seeing it!



Green turtles were fairly regular on snorkelling sorties, particularly on Kri Island. Banded sea-snakes were seen several times.

I didn't keep a "fish list". Suffice to say that there are plenty of different ones. As near as I can tell there is no comprehensive field guide. We had Gerald Allen's "*Field Guide to the Marine Fishes of Tropical Australia and South-East Asia*" but there are many acknowledged gaps in this book and some of the colour plates show colours and patterns that do not resemble the fish we saw.

List of Birds Seen

Note that the numbers in the table in the third and subsequent columns correspond to the Day Number of the trip that each bird was first seen at each site. The diary section adds further comment to what happened on these days.....

plate	Bird	Waigeo	Gam	Kri	Painemu	Friwen	Sorong
3	Dusky Scrubfowl	3	8	13		17	
6	Radjah Shelduck		8	12			
7	Wedge-tailed Shearwater	2					
8	Red-footed Booby	19			14		
9	Lesser Frigatebird	2	7	12	14	16	
10	Bridled Tern				14		

plate	Bird	Waigeo	Gam	Kri	Painemu	Friwen	Sorong
11	Little Tern				14		
11	Black-naped Tern	2	9		14		
11	Greater Crested Tern	2	9		14	16	
14	Black Bittern		7				
15	Little Egret	2					
15	Great-billed Heron	6	9				
15	Eastern Great Egret	2					
15	Eastern Reef-Egret	2	7	12	14	18	
16	Pacific Baza	3					
16	Brahminy Kite	2	7	13		16	
17	Eastern Osprey	3	9		14	16	
17	Gurney's Eagle	4					
17	White-bellied Sea-Eagle	4	12			17	
19	Pomarine Jaeger	19					
20	Gray-headed Goshawk	3	11				
20	Collared Sparrowhawk	6	10				
30	Whimbrel	5		13			
31	Common Sandpiper	2	12	13			
31	Gray-tailed Tattler			13			
32	Red-necked Stint	2					
34	Red-necked Phalarope	19			14		
35	Brown Cuckoo-Dove	2	9				21
35	Great Cuckoo-Dove	5					21
36	Stephan's Emerald Dove	3	9				
36	Thick-billed Ground-Pigeon						22
37	Western Crowned-Pigeon	5	8				
38	Wompoo Fruit-Dove	7					
38	Pink-spotted Fruit-Dove	6	9				21
38	Orange-fronted Fruit-Dove						21
39	Claret-breasted Fruit-Dove	3	11				
39	Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove						20
39	Dwarf Fruit-Dove	3					20
40	Spice Imperial-Pigeon	3	7	15	14	17	
40	Pied Imperial-Pigeon	3	11			16	
41	Zoe's Imperial-Pigeon						21
41	Pinon Imperial-Pigeon	2	8				21
42	Palm Cockatoo	5	9			16	21
42	Sulphur-crested Cockatoo	2	7				
42	Eclectus Parrot	2	7	13		16	21
43	Red-flanked Lorikeet						20
43	Red-fronted Lorikeet						22
44	Black-capped Lory	5					21
45	Violet-necked Lory		7	15			
45	Coconut Lorikeet	2	11				20
46	Red-cheeked Parrot	2	7	13	16		20

plate	Bird	Waigeo	Gam	Kri	Painemu	Friwen	Sorong
46	Great-billed Parrot		12				
46	Moluccan King-Parrot	3	12				22
47	Large Fig-Parrot						21
48	Yellow-capped Pygmy-Parrot						21
48	Double-eyed Fig-Parrot						21
48	Orange-fronted Hanging-Parrot						21
50	Blyth's Hornbill	2	7	15		16	20
50	Channel-billed Cuckoo	3	8			18	22
51	Brush Cuckoo						21
53	Papuan Frogmouth		9				
54	Papuan Boobook	4					
55	Large-tailed Nightjar			15			
57	Glossy Swiftlet	2	7		14	16	20
57	Uniform Swiftlet	3			14		21
57	Moustached Treeswift	2	7			17	
58	Pacific Swallow	2	8	13		16	20
59	Common Paradise-Kingfisher	5	8	14			21
60	Rufous-bellied Kookaburra	2	10	13		16	20
60	Dollarbird	7	8				
61	Beach Kingfisher	2	7	12		16	
62	Yellow-billed Kingfisher	6	9				21
65	Rusty Mouse-Warbler	5	10				
68	Wallace's Fairy-Wren						22
69	Red-throated Myzomela		7				21
69	Papuan Black Myzomela	3					20
71	Helmeted Friarbird	2	7			16	20
71	Long-billed Honeyeater	5	7				
72	Brown-backed Honeyeater		7				
72	Olive Honeyeater	4					
72	Tawny-breasted Honeyeater	5	8				21
73	Varied Honeyeater	6	7	13		16	
73	Spotted Honeyeater	4					21
75	Puff-backed Honeyeater	4					
75	Mimic Honeyeater	2	7	12	14	17	21
76	Pale-billed Scrubwren	5					
77	Fairy Gerygone	4					
77	Yellow-bellied Gerygone	4	11	15			
77	Large-billed Gerygone	5	12				
79	Olive-crowned Flowerpecker						20
79	Yellow-bellied Longbill	3					21
79	Spectacled Longbill	5	7				21
79	Pygmy Longbill	3					
79	Black Sunbird	4	7				20
79	Olive-backed Sunbird	2	7	13	14	16	20
80	White-breasted Woodswallow	2	9	15		16	

plate	Bird	Waigeo	Gam	Kri	Painemu	Friwen	Sorong
80	Lowland Peltops						20
80	Hooded Butcherbird	3	8	13		17	
80	Black Butcherbird	3					21
81	White-bellied Cuckooshrike		10		14		
81	Black-browed Triller						20
82	Barred Cuckooshrike	3	7				
82	Boyer's Cuckooshrike						20
82	Gray-headed Cicadabird						21
85	Rusty Pitohui	5	8				21
85	Little Shrike-Thrush		12				
87	Island Whistler			15			
87	Gray Whistler	4					
88	Shining Flycatcher	5	7	12		17	
89	Spot-winged Monarch	4	8	15			
89	Frilled Monarch	4					
90	Golden Monarch		8				
90	Islet Monarch			15			
90	Yellow-breasted Boatbill	4					
91	Northern Fantail	4	8	15			
91	Willie-wagtail	2	7	12		16	20
93	Glossy-mantled Manucode	3	7	13		17	21
93	Brown-headed Crow	4					
93	Torresian Crow	2	7	13		16	
98	Wilson's Bird-of-Paradise	3					
99	Red Bird-of-Paradise	3	8				
101	Black-sided Robin	4					
104	House Sparrow		8			16	20
104	Eurasian Tree Sparrow						2
105	Gray's Grasshopper-Warbler	4					
107	Spangled Drongo	2	8				21
107	Metallic Starling						21
107	Singing Starling	3	8	13	14	16	
108	Brown Oriole		9				21
108	Golden Myna						21
108	Yellow-faced Myna	7					20
110	Streak-headed Mannikin						22

Birds in red were new for me....

Dusky Scrubfowl – Common throughout the islands and seen most days.

Radjah Shelduck – A few pairs seen on Gam and especially Kri, where the birds are very tame.

Wedge-tailed Shearwater – One pale morph seen on the Sorong – Waisai ferry crossing had the heart racing for a moment!

Red-footed Booby – A pair seen between Arborek and Painemu islands. A large flock on the Waisai – Sorong ferry crossing.
Lesser Frigatebird – Common to abundant.
Bridled Tern – One seen near Painemu Island.
Little Tern – A few seen en-route to Painemu Island.
Black-naped Tern – Fairly common near shore in the islands.
Greater Crested Tern – The commonest tern. Seen most days in the islands.
Black Bittern – One seen in flight at dusk in the mangroves at Nudibranch.
Little Egret – One near the Sorong ferry wharf.
Great-billed Heron – At least half a dozen singles seen from Waigeo and Gam.
Eastern Great Egret – One seen on boat trip to western crowned pigeon site on Waigeo.
Eastern Reef-Egret – Fairly common on the shoreline in the islands.
Pacific Baza – A couple on the BOP Trail, Waigeo, and a few at Macbon, near Sorong.
Brahminy Kite – Reasonably common in the lowlands and along the seashore in the islands.
Eastern Osprey – Seen on all islands except Kri.
Gurney's Eagle – Two seen on Waigeo; one in flight and one on a nest. Apparently they are fond of cuscuses....
White-bellied Sea-Eagle – Several seen on Waigeo, Gam and Friwen.
Pomerine Jaeger – One seen on the Waisai – Sorong ferry crossing.
Gray-headed Goshawk – One or two seen on Waigeo and Gam.
Collared Sparrowhawk – Two seen on Waigeo and one ate the two willie-wagtail chicks on their nest at Nudibranch. Bastard.
Whimbrel – One seen at Yenkangkanes and a couple on Kri.
Common Sandpiper – Small numbers scattered around the islands.
Gray-tailed Tattler – One bird seen on Kri.
Red-necked Stint - ~15 seen in flight on the Sorong – Waisai ferry crossing.
Red-necked Phalarope – Small flocks en route to Painemu Island and on the Waisai – Sorong ferry crossing.
Brown Cuckoo-Dove – Widespread. More often heard than seen.
Great Cuckoo-Dove – Fairly common on Waigeo near the homestay and doing their peculiar display flights at Taman Wisata.
Stephan's Emerald Dove – Fairly common on Waigeo on the roadside. Also common in the overgrown gardens behind Sawinggrai Village, Gam.
Thick-billed Ground-Pigeon – One seen at 0700 flushing from the edge of the road ~800m from the main drag in Taman Wisata. It then perched low in undergrowth and started preening. Lucky!
Western Crowned-Pigeon – Seen on Waigeo and Gam. Yenkangkanes and Nudibranch homestays will arrange visits to the sites on request. You can return to the Gam site yourself after being shown where it is. Don't tell anyone (or get lost, I guess).
Wompoo Fruit-Dove – One seen feeding near the roadside near Yenkangkanes.
Pink-spotted Fruit-Dove – A pair seen feeding on figs on the Waigeo BOP Trail. Singles seen on Gam and at Taman Wisata.
Orange-fronted Fruit-Dove – A couple of pairs at Taman Wisata.
Claret-breasted Fruit-Dove – The commonest and most widespread fruit-dove on Waigeo and Gam.
Orange-bellied Fruit-Dove – At Macbon and much more commonly at Taman Wisata.
Dwarf Fruit-Dove – A large flock (~25+) seen feeding with other fruit doves, hornbills etc, on a fruiting fig on Waigeo BOP Trail. A few seen at Macbon near Sorong.
Spice Imperial-Pigeon – Common on Waigeo and Friwen; less so on the other islands.
Pied Imperial-Pigeon – Very common along the coast on Waigeo, less so on Gam and Friwen.
Zoe's Imperial-Pigeon – Several seen at Taman Wisata, some in small flocks. One bird thankfully perched in the open.
Pinon's Imperial-Pigeon – Very common on Waigeo; common on Gam and at Taman Wisata.

Palm Cockatoo – Common on Waigeo, especially at the homestay. Also seen at Nudibranch, Friwen and Taman Wisata.
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo – Common on Waigeo; less so on Gam.
Eclectus Parrot – Very common on Waigeo, in flocks of up to 25 strong. Common on Gam; less so elsewhere.
Red-flanked Lorikeet – Seen well at Taman Wisata on a fairly small flowering tree. Commonly seen in flight there.
Red-fronted Lorikeet - Seen well at Taman Wisata on the same fairly small flowering tree as red-flanked (above) and feeding with them in a mixed flock of 25-30 birds.
Black-capped Lory – Seen well at Waigeo western crowned pigeon site and flying at Taman Wisata.
Violet-necked Lory – Common at Nudibranch; less so on Kri.
Coconut Lorikeet – Seen daily in noisy flight on Waigeo; less common on Gam and at Taman Wisata.
Red-cheeked Parrot – Common throughout. The most widespread parrot seen.
Great-billed Parrot – Seen in flight once in the regrowth gardens behind Sawinggrai Village on Gam. Good.
Moluccan King-Parrot – Seen in flight several times on Waigeo, Gam and Taman Wisata. Difficult to approach when perched.
Large Fig-Parrot – Often seen in flight at Taman Wisata.
Yellow-capped Pygmy-Parrot – Singles seen in flight several times at Taman Wisata. One small flock seen feeding in the canopy of an emergent tree.
Double-eyed Fig-Parrot – Seen in flight and one perched at Taman Wisata.
Orange-fronted Hanging-Parrot – Two birds perched high in a dead tree (with many nest holes) at Taman Wisata.
Blyth's Hornbill – Common and obvious throughout.
Channel-billed Cuckoo – Seen and heard at all sites except Kri in small numbers.
Brush Cuckoo – Heard at all forested sites and seen at Taman Wisata, where common.
Papuan Frogmouth – A pair flushed near Nudibranch during the day.
Papuan Boobook – Seen well at the Wilson's BOP turnoff on Waigeo. Heard elsewhere on the BOP Trail just before dawn.
Large-tailed Nightjar – Flushed on Kri and heard on Waigeo and Gam.
Glossy Swiftlet – Common.
Uniform Swiftlet – Seen on Waigeo and Painemu. Under-recorded.
Moustached Treeswift – Fairly common on Waigeo and Gam; less so elsewhere.
Pacific Swallow – Common throughout.
Common Paradise-Kingfisher – Common in all forests but seen well only a few times.
Rufous-bellied Kookaburra – Common and obvious throughout; fairly tame.
Dollarbird – A few seen from Yenkanekanes and on Gam.
Beach Kingfisher – Fairly common, noisy and obvious in the islands.
Yellow-billed Kingfisher – Widespread and fairly common but difficult to see. Only seen well at Yenkanekanes.
Rusty Mouse-Warbler – Seen well at dawn opposite Yenkanekanes, at the red BOP site, and less well on Gam.
Wallace's Fairy-Wren – One bird seen at Taman Wisata in the road cutting as it starts steeply downhill. Another calling. Bizarre fairy-wren. Doesn't sound like one and doesn't behave like one.
Red-throated Myzomela – One bird seen feeding on coconut blossom at Nudibranch; several at Taman Wisata.
Papuan Black Myzomela – Seen a few times on the BOP Trail on Waigeo and at Taman Wisata.
Helmeted Friarbird – Common, noisy and obvious at all sites except Kri.
Long-billed Honeyeater – Seen at the Waigeo western crowned pigeon site and at Nudibranch in coconut palms.
Brown-backed Honeyeater – One bird at the red BOP site on Waigeo.
Olive Honeyeater – One bird at Yenkanekanes.

Tawny-breasted Honeyeater – At the Waigeo western crowned pigeon site and behind Sawinggrai Village.
Varied Honeyeater – Common in mangroves and other seaside vegetation in the islands.
Spotted Honeyeater – Seen well once at the red BOP site on Waigeo and again at Taman Wisata.
Puff-backed Honeyeater – Recorded once at the BOP Trail – ignored thereafter.
Mimic Honeyeater – Very common everywhere. Can be a bit of a nuisance.... Oh, it's you again.
Pale-billed Scrubwren – A few seen once near the red BOP site on Waigeo.
Fairy Gerygone – A couple seen once near the red BOP site on Waigeo.
Yellow-bellied Gerygone – The most common gerygone in the islands but by no means easy.
Large-billed Gerygone – Low numbers on Waigeo and Gam.
Olive-crowned Flowerpecker – Very common and approachable at Taman Wisata.
Yellow-bellied Longbill – Fairly common on Waigeo and at Taman Wisata.
Spectacled Longbill - Fairly common on Waigeo, Gam and at Taman Wisata.
Pygmy Longbill – Seen a few times on the Waigeo BOP Trail and inside the forest there.
Black Sunbird – Fairly common on Waigeo, Gam and at Taman Wisata.
Olive-backed Sunbird – The most common and widespread small passerine.
White-breasted Woodswallow – Fairly common and obvious in the islands.
Lowland Peltops – A few seen at Macbon and more commonly at Taman Wisata.
Hooded Butcherbird – Fairly common, noisy and tame in the islands.
Black Butcherbird – Shyer than hooded and seen well only at the Waigeo BOP Trail and at Taman Wisata.
White-bellied Cuckooshrike – A pair seen in Sawinggrai Village, Gam and at Painemu Island.
Black-browed Triller – Common in forests near Sorong.
Barred Cuckooshrike – Several sightings on Waigeo and one on Gam.
Boyer's Cuckooshrike – A large flock feeding on figs at Macbon; also at Taman Wisata.
Gray-headed Cicadabird – Seen a few times at Taman Wisata.
Rusty Pitohui – Fairly common inside forests on Waigeo and Gam and seen briefly at Taman Wisata.
Little Shrike-Thrush – A small flock behind Sawinggrai Village, Gam.
Island Whistler – One bird seen in a mixed flock on Kri on the only walk I did there.
Gray Whistler – A pair inside the forest in a mixed flock near the red BOP site on Waigeo.
Shining Flycatcher – Fairly common, tame and obvious in the islands, often near water.
Spot-winged Monarch – The most common monarch seen; on Waigeo, Gam and Kri.
Frilled Monarch - A pair inside the forest in a mixed flock near the red BOP site on Waigeo.
Golden Monarch - A pair inside the forest in a mixed flock near the western crowned pigeon site on Gam.
Islet Monarch – A pair seen close and well on Kri on the only walk I did there. Probably fairly easy.
Yellow-breasted Boatbill - A pair inside the forest in a mixed flock near the red BOP site on Waigeo.
Northern Fantail – Fairly common within and at the edge of forests on Waigeo, Gam and Kri.
Willie-wagtail – Common in disturbed habitats in the islands.
Glossy-mantled Manucode – Common throughout. Seen daily.
Brown-headed Crow – Seen a few times on Waigeo. Suspected calling on Gam. Seen well at the Waigeo western crowned pigeon site and less well on the BOP Trail. Call gives it away. Apparently not seen near habitation. Beware that Torresian crow was also seen well into the forest contrary to what you might read.....
Torresian Crow – Fairly common in the islands, generally in disturbed habitats.
Wilson's Bird-of-Paradise – one male was seen well at the display site. Others were calling nearby. Barry-Sean visited on a different day and reports the same experience. The birds are very timid.

Red Bird-of-Paradise – Common on Waigeo and Gam. Females often seen in mixed flocks or feeding in canopy well away from display sites. The display site behind Sawinggrai Village on Gam was better and more accessible than the one on Waigeo if you go to both sites.
Black-sided Robin – One shy bird seen well near the red BOP site on Waigeo.
House Sparrow – Yeah; there’s them.
Eurasian Tree Sparrow – As above.
Gray’s Grasshopper-Warbler – A couple seen and others heard on the BOP Trail on Waigeo.
Spangled Drongo – Uncommon on Waigeo; more so on Gam and at Taman Wisata.
Metallic Starling – Small flocks at Taman Wisata.
Singing Starling – On all islands, particularly near villages, where common.
Brown Oriole – Seen well behind Sawinggrai Village and at Taman Wisata.
Golden Myna – One bird seen well and calling (strange call) at Taman Wisata.
Yellow-faced Myna – Small flocks at Yenkanekanes and at Macbon; also Taman Wisata where fairly common.
Streak-headed Mannikin – A small flock seen twice (same birds, probably) in roadside vegetation at Taman Wisata.

Birds that were “heard only”, e.g. marbled frogmouth and greater black coucal, are not recorded.

Snorkelling

Almost everyone who visits the Raja Ampat Islands does so to dive or snorkel. The thought of seeing other wildlife or lesbians never enters their minds. Almost every offered activity has ‘being in the water’ as its focus. This is a little sad as there is so much more to do and see.



I learnt that November is apparently not the ideal time for snorkelling in the islands, as water clarity is said to improve around February. Despite the opinions offered by western dive resort operators, I suspect that most of the big fish and sharks have been eaten, and this is still happening despite the 'protection' given the area by a marine reserve status.

If big fish are lacking, small fish are not – possibly, in part, because of the demise of the big ones! It boggles the mind that they can all find something to eat and space to swim. Imagine a crowded aquarium. Now jam some more fish in it and you might get some idea.

Most of the drop-offs we found were all fairly uniform. My only other snorkelling holidays were in the Solomon Islands. The drop-offs there are varied and rocky structures abound at

almost every site, thus making each one quite a different experience. There are lots more big fish, sharks and marine mammals too.

We took stinger suits to protect against marine stingers. We found them to be unnecessary. Others, at different times of the year and at other sites, might form a different view. I wouldn't bother with them.



Diary

Day 1 - 10th November 2014

The lead-in to this holiday wasn't too flash. I was on first name terms with a number of medical specialists dealing with gut issues. Some of these were ugly (the issues – not the specialists). Interest in life was mild.

Barry-Sean and I caught the train to the airport for a Garuda A330-300 flight to Denpasar and beyond, leaving Sydney at 1000. The aircraft left an hour late due to “operational reasons”. This was later explained to be the late arrival of the plane. A bit odd really as the same plane could be seen parked on the tarmac remote from the terminal for some hours... Maybe they couldn't find it? Airports are busy and confusing places and they often have lots of planes lying around – it could happen I guess.

The flight was smooth, the cabin service was good (much better than Qantas, but that's not saying much) and it arrived on time, that is, late.

The queue at Denpasar immigration was enormous. After we retrieved Barry-Sean's luggage off the floor – it had been taken off the conveyor – we exchanged some USD to rupiahs and trundled the kilometre or so through seemingly endless corridors to the domestic terminal. By the time we fizz-gigged about, asked a few questions and found the departure gate for the flight to Makassar, it was boarding. The 737-800 flight was full. It left and arrived on-time.

We had a lengthy stopover in Makassar so we'd booked into the Darma Nusantara II Hotel, located adjacent to the road leading into the airport. We caught a taxi to it. We wondered whether we'd ever see our luggage again as it had been checked to Sorong, West Papua, whether we liked it or not.

The Darma Nusantara was fine. I managed to get the restaurant to open. A gay waiter soon served me a lovely meal. A sleeping pill completed my day.

Day 2 - 11th November 2014

A wake-up call for 0120 is not the best way to start your day but it's streets ahead of not waking for a 0330 flight. The hotel offered a free transfer to the airport. We managed to get there in plenty of time to go to the wrong gate (it had changed). A panicked length-of-the-airport sprint was required. We were the last to board the Bombardier CJ1000 flight to Sorong, Manokwari and Jayapura.

The flight was smooth and the scenery rather beautiful as the sun rose and we crossed seas dotted with reefs and islands. Garuda lavished us with a hearty breakfast and after a welcomed flypast of our ultimate destination, the well-forested Waigeo Island, we landed on time at Sorong. Miraculously our bags arrived on the same plane that we did.

We escaped the posse of taxi touts and wandered the few hundred metres to the JE Meridien Hotel located just across the road from the airport. Here we had to buy a Raja Ampat Marine Park permit. We only had six or so hours to achieve this before the ferry for the islands departed. Knowing what I now know, I would have been off to Taman Wisata!

Of interest was the fact that someone had inserted some empty packaging into the top of my checked-in luggage. And I don't look remotely like Schapelle Corby!

The Marine Park office was said to open at 0900. Didn't happen. At about 1030 we managed an audience and paid our 500,000 IDR. We then had an early, rather delicious lunch and cleansing ale at the hotel's café.

We taxied to the ferry wharf at 1130 for our 1200, 1300, 1340, 1400 departure to Waisai. The departure time depended on who you asked and how recent their intelligence was, assuming they had any. The ferry left at 1420.

On the wharf I was fascinated to see two guys fishing with plastic drinking cups. They put dough balls inside the cups which were attached to some fine fishing line tied to the top with a line on each side in a small triangle. They'd toss the cup into the water a short way with the dough held in by centrifugal force. Small mullet would swim inside the open top and be retrieved by pulling quickly on the line! The mullet were twice the length of the cups!

We sat at the stern of the 400-seat ferry and enjoyed a coolish breeze. We departed slowly at first as we passed other shipping. After ten minutes or so the skipper put the foot down and the 40 metre ferry planed away at over 25 knots. We covered the 70 kilometre journey in less than 90 minutes. We managed a few birds along the way, with crested terns, lesser frigatebirds and a pale morph wedge-tailed shearwater. Also seen was a constant stream of

rubbish being hurled into the sea by our fellow passengers.



The diminutive and rather delightful Florens from Yenkangkanes Homestay was on the wharf to meet us, much to our relief after so much travelling. We quickly disembarked. A chap with no nose harassed us for our pin. I hadn't the slightest clue what he was talking about. He was rather persistent, with a string of incomprehensible statements and questions. Eventually we figured out he wanted to see our expensively acquired marine park passes.

We asked Florens several times if we could buy some beer – no worries, of course we could. No problem at all. We arrived at the homestay without any. Another raft of brewed beverage questions elicited the

response that the only place we could buy beer was Waisai, the place we had just come from... oh well.

Benny Mambrasar soon found us. He's the local birding guide. We agreed to go hunting red BOPs on the morrow. This plan was to change a few times as another larger group from a local dive resort vied for his attention. Ultimately he decided to burn the higher income from the other group, which was admirable of him. Maybe the stated fact that we were staying for five nights swayed him..... A 0500 start the next morning was agreed.



Benny and his daughter

Dinner was very good - fish, rice, fried green vegetables and paw-paw (papaya). Then a restless sleep after two very long travel days....

Day 3 - 12th November 2014

Benny had organised several kilos of breakfast; later discovered to be boiled potatoes and 15% of the free world's supply of bananas. We could have opened a market stall.

We walked toward Waisai along the only road for about a kilometre before turning inland. We started climbing on steep ex-logging roads. I asked Benny if we could change our plan and visit the Wilson's BOP site instead of the red. All good. After a brisk hour's walk we turned onto a side track which ended after a few hundred metres at a rustic hide. A male Wilson's was in attendance. Others were calling nearby. I considered that I was possibly the only birder in the world to see this stunning bird on this particular day. I remembered good friend Tony Palliser saying that Wilson's was the most spectacular bird there is. I'm not sure about that, though it is stunning. I watched for an hour, interspersed with hopeless attempts at taking photos.



Benny, having accomplished his primary mission, seemed keen to return, so I gave him some lucre and sent him ahead.

Red BOPs were seen along the road, along with dwarf and claret-breasted fruit-doves, pygmy longbills and a scrum of birds that would be seen daily on Waigeo. These included Blyth's hornbill, eclectic parrot, sulphur-crested cockatoo, red-cheeked parrot, glossy-mantled manucode and various imperial pigeons.

Arnold, Florens' dad, found me wandering the road and gave me a lift back to the homestay on his motorcycle. West Papuans don't seem to care much what you do, but appear unsure of the abilities of visitors when it comes to them getting lost. It helps to explain or demonstrate that you're not completely stupid, if this is possible – or true.

I couldn't wait to get into the water, which was mild and refreshing. The reef off Yenkankanes starts 20 metres or so offshore beyond an area of seagrass. The corals are pretty good – though not as spectacular as some we would later see – and the variety of tropical fish was fair. A school of bumphead parrotfish were the only large fish observed.

Lunch, fish with an eggplant dish, rice and bananas, was good, with the fish being very tasty.

The afternoon proved to be an exercise in getting sunburnt, despite not sitting in the sun. You'd think that someone aged 58 would know about reflected glare from water, but there you go.

As Florens had been to Waisai, we'd left her with the task of procuring beer for us. She managed to achieve this, at a cost. The beers cost 70,000 IDR (nearly \$A7 a 500ml can!). We enjoyed them immensely.

Dinner, fish, was almost as good as putting heads on pillows and having a wonderful sleep.

Day 4 - 13th November 2014

A 0400 start was agreed as Barry-Sean was determined to visit the red BOP site, which is not quite as far off as the Wilson's. The earlier start gave us extra time for rest stops and to do some spotlighting. At the turnoff to the display tree we taped in a pair of jungle boobooks. Heard and briefly seen was one of a couple of calling sugar gliders.

Our arrival at the red BOP site coincided with the dawn chorus, which was full-on. A spotted honeyeater was seen in left field as we enjoyed the mesmerising performances of half a dozen male red BOPs. We watched for a half hour or so before searching a western crowned pigeon site nearby. We failed to see any evidence of these so we retreated toward the entry point to the forest from the logging road. Here we crashed into the best mixed flock we

were to see in the islands. Included were black-sided robin, grey whistler, yellow-breasted boatbill, spot-winged and frilled monarchs, fairy gerygone, yellow-bellied longbill, rusty mouse-warbler, northern fantail and a few others. A solid hour was spent without moving, thus observing the first rule of rainforest birding – never leave a mixed flock!

We had heard some brown-headed crows calling while in the forest. We had unsatisfactory views of these from the road on the descent. A final little gem was a Gray's grasshopper-warbler which almost crushed my foot as it was slowly lured out of the undergrowth. Others of its ilk were later seen or heard.

“Jungle coffee” assisted our late morning “Siemsing” – the art of bird identification long after the bird has faded from sight (named after the master himself, David Siems!).

Before we knew it, Margaretha, our cook and Florens' delightful mum, called us for lunch.

Kinks in my back were smoothed by a snorkel and a swim.



White-bellied sea-eagles and a Gurney's eagle were observed from our mid-afternoon perch over the water.

A late afternoon stroll to Saporkren Village to observe a wedding was rather fun. 400 people attended the festivities which seemed to last for days. The bride didn't look too excited. Many of the wedding guests had put on their best thongs (flip-flops). We meandered about saying hullo to the friendly local folk.

Florens disappeared into Waisai and failed to return (with our beer).

Dinner had no fish. Good. It was a lovely omelette along with snake beans and other vegetables in coconut milk (made from 'house' coconuts!) and rice.

Day 5 - 14th November 2014

The excitement never stops! This was to be our first serious attempt to see a western crowned pigeon. These monsters are about as big as pigeons get and I'd longed to see one. We were to go by boat to a site known by Arnold and Benny, well away from villages. We



left at 0800, a little before our lunch could be organised. Or maybe we ate our lunch with breakfast?

Our first stop was Saporkren Village to buy fuel. Just about everyone was asleep, having been up all night enjoying (or enduring) the wedding festivities, which called for, in part, non-stop ear-splitting drum solos. After finding fuel we travelled north-west for a few kilometres or so, enjoying spectacular island scenery, a few waterbirds and perfect weather.

A stand of mangroves ended at a limestone cliff. Here we disembarked, surprised not to be eaten by mosquitoes. Behind the mangroves was a hectare or so of gardens – cocoa, betel nut, jackfruit, coconut and lemons. These belonged to Arnold, which is rather odd given that he was born on the island of Ambon, and we were miles from anywhere. We trudged up a steep mountain slope, apparently on some sort of mission to get to somewhere important before the world ended.



Limestone is the only type of rock that defies logic when it comes to the landscapes it can form. We arrived at a place that wasn't as steep as before but is utterly impossible to describe. Here we were informed that western crowned pigeons would roam after they descended from the tree tops,

possibly later in the day. This seemed unlikely. I wandered off, as is my want, seeing a mixed flock of rufous-coloured birds. To my knowledge New Guinea is the only place on earth that has mixed flocks of mid-sized rufous-coloured birds!

Arnold and I wandered back to where we had left Benny and Barry-Sean. They weren't there. No worries – Arnold started back down the hill. We veered off into some limestone gullies that were spectacular and would have been enjoyed if we weren't moving so fast. Within a stone's throw of Arnold's orchard I spotted a western crowned pigeon walking peacefully along the ground. "Stop, stop, stop". Arnold was ahead of me and soon flushed the bird, which wasn't seen again.

We caught up with the other guys, had lunch, supplemented by young coconuts, as two brown-headed crows called, perched, flew overhead a couple of times and disappeared. I

wondered how the birding was going to go for the rest of the trip – there wasn't much left on my "must see" list!

Stopping at Urai Island for a snorkel rounded out a lovely boat trip. Although the coral and the fish were varied and colourful, there were no big fish or sharks to be seen. The boys toured us about a number of other islands; returning a little after 1400. Margaretha had prepared yet another lunch....

A late afternoon swim was enjoyed despite the fact that my body wasn't craving for the exercise. This didn't stop me from later climbing into the forest across the road. The bird list there was good but I failed to add anything new.

Dinner, fish and stuff, was described in my diary as "good". Sleep was better.



Day 6 - 15th November 2014

Barry-Sean and I agreed that he could get to the Wilson's site if he set out early enough. We were up at 0400 and off shortly thereafter. The spotlighting was frustrating with both marbled and Papuan frogmouths heard but neither responding to "tapes". Jungle boobooks were again heard.

The dawn saw overcast conditions and the birds certainly didn't like it. This is sometimes the case in the tropics, although it seems illogical to me. Barry-Sean went with Benny and I

birded by myself. It was quite frustrating. I knew there were all manner of lovely things in the forest but they wouldn't call and every strategy I tried came up fairly empty. Eventually I managed a pair of pink-spotted fruit-doves, a new bird for me, in amongst some feeding claret-breasted and dwarfs.

Back at the homestay we finally managed excellent and prolonged views of a pair of yellow-billed kingfishers, gorgeous things that we'd heard many times but had hitherto failed to see. This was celebrated with two mugs of coffee.

An afternoon snorkel was pleasant if not exciting. A subsequent swim once more straightened a few kinks out of my back.

A late afternoon scan of the treetops opposite the homestay allowed for some musing on life in the Raja Ampats, but added nothing to the bird list.

Dinner was fish; not surprising really. Margaretha amazed in her ability to combine and re-combine the same set of ingredients into delicious, balanced and



varied meals, with fish. Her afternoon deep fried snacks defy description. Yum, anyway.

Arnold, now known by us as "Ambon Man" displayed his electrical skills as he toiled about with the failing wiring from the generator to the beach-house. I wasn't shocked that there were issues given that power points and naked wires were fully exposed to the sun, rain, wildlife and small children. His tracking of the fault through all the dodgy connections was commendable.



Day 7 - 16th November 2014

Sunrise was beautiful - and noisy. Hornbills, cockatoos, butcherbirds, friarbirds, kingfishers and willie-wagtails all called incessantly. A flock of 25 eclectus parrots flew past. Imperial pigeons were everywhere.

Sunday breakfast was fried banana chips. Margaretha went to church (Lutheran) while Ambon Man, clearly

belonging to the local minority of unbelievers, continued his battle with the electrical wiring.

Having no better plan I traipsed along the road toward Waisai for a few hundred metres or so. Wompoo fruit-dove, the rather gorgeous yellow-faced myna and dollarbird were added to the trip list.

Back at the ranch Barry-Sean reported a small pod of bottle-nosed dolphins.

A mid-morning swim on a stifling windless day preceded our transfer to Nudibranch Homestay on Gam Island. Florens had returned from Waisai to collect her cash. She accepted my calculation of monies owed without any dispute. When we signed the visitors' book we could see why. The homestay can't claim to have had a busy year. Most of the 15 or so visitors were Indonesians, presumably short stay. We may well have been their best customers for 2014. And as we didn't have a single complaint – maybe their best ever!

Benny arrived. The gear was loaded onto Arnold's outrigger longboat along with Benny's kids, Florens and a chap whose reason for attendance was unclear. We guessed that whenever tourists pay for transfers between islands, anyone wanting transport, or who has nothing better to do, comes along. Good thinking.



The 80 minute transfer cost us 1,000,000 IDR. The ride was scenic, passing a number of homestays, villages and dive resorts - and wet. We were soaked by the time we arrived, due to wind chop climbing aboard.

Nudibranch is tucked into a short, shallow inlet with mangroves on one side. As Florens had phoned Paulus, the owner, he was expecting us and had lunch prepared. He admitted he had otherwise forgotten about our booking as it had been made so long ago. Paulus speaks

good English. Like so many who have English as a second language, speaking it and understanding it are two different things. Or maybe it's me?

Our new accommodation was fancier, with separate rooms, en suite bathroom, towels, books, maps and a welcoming young coconut each. Also welcoming was a willie-wagtail couple that had nested on top of a stick in the middle of the lagoon. They had two chicks, although this was a temporary arrangement that didn't have a happy ending.....

Paulus confirmed that cuscuses were still present and soon showed us one peering stupidly from a pandanus. Even better news followed – 300 metres away in Sawinggrai Village there was beer! You couldn't wipe the smiles off our faces!

Quite a few birds could be seen feeding on coconut blossoms in the grounds of the homestay.

The short walk to the village indeed produced Bintang (@ 50,000 IDR per 500ml can).

Dinner, fish, not surprising really, was fine. Paulino, a large and colourful male Waigeo cuscus joined us. And just like the largely brain-dead brushtail possums at home, it allowed us to pat it as long as the food didn't run out. So ended another day in paradise.



"Paulino" the Waigeo cuscus

Day 8 - 17th November 2014

A walk in the local forest was keenly anticipated. Local guides Athus and Sonny were to take us wherever we wanted to go. We set off through Sawinggrai and then into some degraded gardens behind it. We then quickly descended through good quality, selectively logged (by hand) monsoon rainforest, the only type of forest locally available excepting mangroves. We soon flushed and saw a western crowned pigeon. At the same place a truly wild Waigeo cuscus stared at us, while a colourful pair of golden monarchs cavorted overhead. More was to come, with a scrub (or amethystine) python coiled on the ground and an endangered Cenderawasih Bay flying fox flushing from its daytime roost.



A late morning snorkel off the front of the lagoon was fantastic, with a black-tipped reef shark and shitloads of fish I'd never seen. The highlight was being surrounded by ~500 big-eye trevally up to 80cm long! This went on for ten minutes or so. Bravely (some may say – stupidly) I snorkelled without a shirt, with the inevitable result. Sunburn came my way.

We had new neighbours, a pair of legally-married New York lesbians. Annie and Kanako became good friends and excellent company. We were to spend nine days with them. They said that they had been travelling since April 2013. I was the second person to spot that they were gay – or at least acknowledge the fact. I'm not certain what this means?



Lunch was fish, omelette, noodles and rice, with sugar bananas.

We enjoyed a placid afternoon, with overcast conditions and light showers.

A late afternoon solo sortie to the local red BOP display site produced many male birds.

We enjoyed dinner with our new friends. Tonight Melissa, a young female cuscus, joined us. Barry-Sean contrived to get scratched by it.

Day 9 - 18th November 2014

A short inland walk from the homestay produced a pair of Papuan frogmouths and another western crowned pigeon (judging by the racket it made during take-off).

Kanako, Annie, Barry-Sean and I had organised a tour of Gam Lagoon by boat. Very pretty it was too. We passed through a water cave which had Raffray's sheath-tailed bats in it; inspected a cave full of Beaufort's naked-backed fruit bats and stopped at a couple of snorkel sites. These revealed some odd things, including a stonefish, an upside-down jellyfish, two nudibranchs, a banded sea-snake and thanks to the keen eyes of Yoris, our guide, lots of other stuff that I simply wouldn't have seen.



Threatening rain sent us back to the homestay for lunch. Lunch did not include fish.

Afterwards there was snorkelling with the girls. It was great, with lots of reef fish, turtles and some massive sweetlips and other large fish. Many long-toms and the same (?) monster school of big-eye trevally were in attendance.



At 1530 we four journeyed to the red BOP site. Five or six males BOPs displayed – a sight that is hard to get sick of. We all returned to the village where the local kids kept us entertained with singing and playing with simple homemade toys. They were so joyous and friendly to us and to each other, it was almost overwhelming. Paulus later explained that he sponsors a weekly village and surrounds “plastics” clean-up. It is mostly the young girls that get involved. Excellent work!

Dinner was fish, a big bucket of ‘prawn’ chips, rice, mixed green vegetables and bananas. No cuscuses came. Paulus said they didn’t like the wet weather that was visiting us.

Day 10 - 19th November 2014

Each day seemed to plan itself the previous day, seemingly without much thinking on our part.

As we hurtled towards the half-way point of the holiday we reflected on just how refreshingly pleasant, open, honest and welcoming the West Papuan people have been. All of the lesbians have been pretty awesome as well. I reflected that Raja Ampat didn’t leave me feeling vaguely depressed, like Sulawesi did some years earlier. Probably because the forests are not heading quickly down the toilet.

Just 15 minutes after sunrise, while I was musing on the state of the world, a small but very efficient missile was hurtling towards a stick in the middle of the lagoon in front of me. The willie-wagtail family lost a chick to a male collared sparrowhawk, which sat proudly in the mangroves with its punctured prey while trying its hardest to attract every angry bird in the vicinity. The poor old willie-wagtails had a bad start to their day. It would end even worse....

Birding was tough. Although I heard a few mystery bags within the forest they refused to be seen.

I returned to the homestay to discover the forward program for the rest of the day and the next had been sorted by Barry-Sean and the girls; proving that inaction on my part is a viable strategy.

Great. Fish for lunch. After eating fish, two and half hours was delightfully spent watching them on a marathon snorkel event on the ‘house reef’. A ‘walking shark’, nudibranchs, vast shoals of trevally, some big puffer-fish and myriad colourful reef fish kept us all entertained. Barry-Sean and I had a beer and then ‘went to town’ to have a second. We were starting to fall in love with Sawinggrai.

Fifteen minutes before sunset the willie-wagtail parents, had they been clearer thinkers, would have hidden, sold into slavery or sent their remaining chick on a long journey. Instead they witnessed the same male collared sparrowhawk kill it. The only comfort I could take from this was that there are still far more willie-wagtails in the world than there are sparrowhawks.



Meanwhile, as we ate our fish dinner, it was a 'three cuscus night' with Paula, Melissa and Paulino getting their banana fixes.

**Day 11 - 20th
November 2014**

A high tide in the lagoon saw me doing my laps before breakfast.

Pancakes and coffee were followed by a couple of hours in the forest behind the village, again without disturbing any 'new' birds.

Kanako, Annie, Barry-Sean, Yoris, Sonny and I then set forth in the boat on a snorkelling extravaganza. The first site was Manta Point. Here we observed other snorkelers and divers, but sadly, the area was manta deficient. Next was the extreme north-western corner of Mansuar Island. This had big fish, sharks, turtles and plenty else to keep us looking. A few kilometres along the south-western side of the island we were back in the water looking for frogfish. Here were the best rock structures and water clarity we were to see. Fish were everywhere and Sonny succeeded in finding us a frogfish (or anglerfish).

Lunch, fish etc, was enjoyed on a sandy Mansuar Island beach under a fig tree. I was reminded that I was in Indonesia, and not paradise, by the volume and variety of plastic rubbish along the high tide mark and beyond.

We then charged across a few kilometres of sea to reach Arborek



Island; a small but relatively densely populated scrap of land, on account of it being flat. We snorkelled from the main jetty and to the west. The marine life was thick – much like that in the Solomons. Annie cut her finger on some coral. This was no drama as far as Annie was concerned, but the boys wanted to get her back to the homestay. A cursory snorkel at Manta Point on the return journey turned up exactly the same number of mantas as earlier. None.



I quizzed Paulus on his recommendation for homestays at our next destination – Kri Island. He suggested Mangkor Kodon. He called them and booked us in. Paulus quoted 500,000 IDR as the transfer fee, somewhat less than the 1,600,000 suggested by a dick from Wombon Swandiwe Homestay, also on Kri, who we had met earlier at Arborek wharf.

Given that we'd walked, swam and been snorkelling four times, Barry-Sean thoughtfully proffered that a beer was necessary. Once more we became passive observers of village life and agreed that we would be sad to leave Sawinggrai.

Dinner, fish, fairly predictable really, was just fine.

Day 12- 21st November 2014

After breakfast, and despite not having seen a new bird for several days, I walked once more behind Sawinggrai Village. I was heading for the western crowned pigeon site. On the way there I was thrilled to see a great-billed parrot in flight. I'd missed these on Ternate Island,



further west in Indonesia, a few years earlier. Another crowned pigeon was seen in what I was now starting to think of as a typical view – loud flapping, crashing through the trees and vanishing. A group of Moluccan king parrots were briefly observed feeding in the orchid garden.

We packed and left Nudibranch at 0930, bound for Mangkor Kodon Homestay on Kri Island. Mangkor Kodon is perfectly situated on the north-western end of the island. It is quite horrible. The homestay greeter showed Kanako, Annie and I the rooms available, complete with holes in the roof, rats and mattresses shaped like, and the colour of, bananas. A few years earlier this homestay, the first to be built in Raja Ampat, was used as the site and accommodation for the French “Survivor” TV series. Whether any or all of the French participants had used the mattresses shown us is debatable. The Mangkor Kodon staffer, thinking that we weren’t terribly impressed, funny that, helpfully suggested we try other accommodation options on the island. He went further to say that if our search failed to turn up anything, we weren’t to come back to Mangkor Kodon. We were in full agreement on that score.

Having failed to find any vacancies on Kri, we returned to Nudibranch. None of us were unhappy about this. One thing was achieved by Annie and Kanako (which seemed like good news at the time); they had arranged for us to stay at Wombon Swandiwe Homestay on Kri from the next morning and for as long as wished.

It was fish for lunch, you beauty, followed by a two hour snorkel on the house reef with the girls. In a rarely seen bit of fish-on-fish action I witnessed a long-tom trash a puller. “Long-tom” and “puller” are both names for fish, unlikely as that might sound.

Paulus and Sonny were seen heading out in the homestay’s boat to massacre our dinner. Annie and I piled in as welcomed guests. This turned out to be an excellent idea as we ventured well into Gam Lagoon and to some lovely locations we hadn’t visited on our earlier trip there. A couple of feeding dolphins were spotted.

A large sweetlips was speared. It was later scaled and cleaned via the utility of a machete.

That fish was for dinner was no surprise.



Day 13 - 22nd November 2014

Refreshed from a pre-breakfast swim I stayed away from a minor drama playing out between the girls and Paulus over their lack of Raja Ampat Marine Park passes. "Problem belong someone else."

Once more we said our goodbyes as Sonny and Yoris took us back to Kri Island, this time to Wombon Swandiwe. Here a room rate was negotiated by Kanako and Annie. Henke, the manager, gave us the run of the place. Wombon is a new homestay and the facilities reflect this. Our tame lesbians also negotiated a price to take us to Painemu Island and the said-to-be superb snorkelling site known as Melissa's Garden, the next day. They took Henke down from 4,600,000 to 3,000,000 IDR. I suspect they also negotiated our way out of one boat and into another, smaller, slower and less seaworthy craft.....

A pre-lunch snorkel on the house reef was starting to look much the same as every other snorkel. The same could be said for our lunch - fish, with beans and rice.



After eating we wandered off with Henke in the direction of Mansuar Island, which can be accessed at low tide across a shallow sand spit. Henke had said we were going there to shop for beer, and for shampoo for the girls. Then he changed his mind, informing us that he had already bought the beer, forget about the shampoo, and that we should return to the homestay. It was all rather mysterious.....



The view from Wombon is across the main channel towards Gam and Waigeo islands. Boat traffic kept us entertained as did a marlin leaping out of the water several times.

Henke had purchased beer from one of the other homestays. I gave him money for ten cans, telling him he could keep one for himself. So he brings back nine cans and drinks two himself. I was starting to dislike Henke.

Dinner was yellowfin tuna; okay, it was fish.

We four had taken to dreaming of crispy pata, a Philippine dish that consists entirely of fried pork hocks. One thing was certain, it would not be found in Raja Ampat. Exactly like red wine wouldn't be.

A post-fish dinner discussion with Kanako on the Japanese psyche was an education (for me at least).



Day 14 - 23rd November 2014

A travel day I'll never forget.

Henke's grandfather (that's who Henke said he was – the truth may live elsewhere) took us to Painemu Island, leaving at 0800. Henke came too. The boat was of a fibreglass dugout design, the best part of thirty feet long and three wide. It lacked outriggers. It was powered by a 15hp Yamaha outboard, for a little while at least. We enjoyed the first half-hour. It was windless and smooth motoring at around 15 knots.

The motor started acting up as we neared a current-induced whirlpool off Arborek Island. I took the view that if I concentrated really hard on ignoring the problem, it would go away. The engine then died. It was encouraged to re-start and eventually we ventured into the open sea in a spluttering and very uncertain way.

Some birds were seen including a small flock of red-necked phalaropes, some red-footed boobies and black-naped, crested and little terns.



After two nervous hours we entered a lagoon at Painemu. Here a new 300-step staircase led to a lookout, very recently opened by then Indonesian President Yudhoyono. Upon reaching the lookout point I tried hard not to look out. I peered inland at an imperial pigeon instead. It was not to last – I slowly turned around. My comment to the girls was that the view was up there with Machu Picchu and Iguassu Falls as the most breathtaking scene I'd seen. The photos below, and on Page 1, hardly do it justice.





We adjourned briefly to the only homestay on the island to pay them some money for reasons that were never adequately explained to us.

Snorkel site "Melissa's Garden" was abject rubbish. The girls were quite disappointed to find that this "big fish nirvana" where all the sea critters supposedly tamely go about their business oblivious to those who might be watching, was

crap. Maybe the fact that the visibility at the time of our visit was akin to that found in an Indian toilet had something to do with it. I couldn't find the arse-end of our boat from three metres away.

Lunch at a nearby beach proved to be a turning point for the girls - and for Henke. It was here that Kanako enquired of me what maggots look like. Hmmm. Trouble brewing. A couple of happy young fly larvae were trawling through the tail-end of Kanako's yellowfin. Lunch was subsequently donated to the island's burgeoning hermit crab population. The day was collapsing, much like the termite smorgasbord masquerading as a partly-built homestay next to us.

It didn't improve. Storm-induced quartering 1.2 metre wind waves battered our spluttering craft as we slowly made our way back into open waters. Every wave tried to join us in the boat. I kept a watch on lee shores, constantly recalculating how far I could swim before it got dark, rehearsing in my head some soothing words and strategies should we all end up in whatever sea it was that we were trying to cross.

Eventually Arborek Island cleared the horizon, followed by Mansuar and Kri. We arrived burnt, tired and wet.



The girls were not at all happy. Barry-Sean and I, on the other hand, were strongly motivated by what was sitting in the freezer of the homestay's fridge. Really, a day that had everything!

Day 15 - 24th November 2014

A perfect foil for not dying at sea is to walk in a forest, so that's what I did. A trail was found that runs along a ridge north-west from the back of Mambrasar Guesthouse. It was full of bird-sound. Sitting quietly proved fruitful as a pair of islet monarchs flew in with some northern fantails. A large-tailed nightjar flushed at my feet at a wonderful lookout point at the end of the island. On the return a good-sized mixed flock added island whistler, another small island specialist, along with sightings of spot-winged monarchs, shining flycatchers, northern fantails and lemon-bellied warblers.



Henke was increasingly getting on everyone's nerves. His stocks failed to improve when the girls asked him for the cost of a transfer to Waisai. The 1,600,000 he quoted was just a tad higher than the 300,000 offered by Yenkoranu, a nearby rival homestay!! He came down to 1,000,000. The laughter never stopped. Idiot.

Given that I was the only holdout who didn't have stomach issues, we all decided to leave Swambon the next day. The girls were going to Waisai, Sorong and then ultimately to Tokyo, while Barry-Sean and I were off to Friwen Island on the recommendation of our newest best

lesbian friends. I left all the contact and transfer negotiations to those best skilled – everyone other than myself.

A pre-lunch snorkel was compromised by my contact with a coral-Nazi. This German or perhaps Dutch chap offered a string of expletives by way of greeting. As I was wearing earplugs and didn't really want to remove them, he had largely finished his pointless rant by the time I could summon up some of my best lines in sarcasm and insult. He wisely swam away. Good. Apparently he thought I was standing on some coral.

Since The Maggot Incident, fish was "off" at Wombon Swandiwe. Lunch was omelette.

Another snorkel in the direction of Yenkoranu's pier was enjoyed. Four turtles and myriad fish were seen.

Barry-Sean joined me for an icy cold beer at Yenkoranu, which had spiritually become our new home. It was here that one of the staff, a gentle and quiet West Papuan chap, gave us a tip about "Hutong Lindu", a great forest site near Sorong on the mainland.



While watching a chap at Yenkoranu clean some tuna I was quietly told to grab my snorkel gear for the daily feeding of the sharks - with the tuna guts and off-cuts. I plonked myself into the water at the end of the pier as a dozen or so black-tipped reef sharks, along with a number of other brave fish, large and small, came to join the feast. This thankfully didn't include me or

either of the two Dutch girls in bikinis nearby. Now here were some dangerous animals indeed! A great experience!



Back at Wombon we enjoyed another beer as Barry-Sean negotiated a 500,000 IDR fee for a transfer to Friwen on the morrow.

This was our last night with Annie and Kanako. I was very sad to part. I found it hard to believe that we had become such good friends in such a short space of time. Inspiring post-dinner subjects discussed included the problems associated with long-distance toilet-less public transport, and the female appliance known as the p-style.....



Day 16 - 25th November 2014

A swim in front of the homestay started my day. Henke then tried to extort an extra 300,000 IDR for the boat transfer. I put on a dummy spit and stormed off with half a mug of coffee in my hand. This was mostly a theatrical performance. The numbskull soon relented. The boat arrived at 0630 for our 1000 departure. What the hell, let's go. But first, I had to go to Yenkoranu Homestay to buy some emergency beer rations....

We said our goodbyes to Kanako and Annie and set forth for Famangkor Homestay on Friwen Island.

Our arrival was unusual in that there was nobody at the homestay to receive us. The 'island telegraph' was working however, and soon Etta,

the daughter of the homestay owner, wandered in from Friwen Village. It happened that Yopi, the owner, had gone to Waisai to get fresh supplies. This is a good reason to book ahead of time at homestays...

We walked to the village through ancient mango and breadfruit trees. It looked superficially like wonderful forest but is, in reality, one big overgrown garden. The village was very quiet, almost deserted in fact, and clean and tidy. It owned a signposted intersection. Who could possibly get lost in a village with only two paths?

Back at Famangkor I swam across the channel to the "Friwenbomba Wall". This was a mistake. As soon as I got there, it was time to swim back. It was further than I guessed, plus strong currents meant that I couldn't stop swimming lest I become a statistic.

The family that run Famangkor are brilliant. They cannot do enough to help. They speak very little English but this was never a problem for us. Today they made needless apologies when they failed to serve us fish for lunch. The omelette, greens and rice was perfectly okay.



I snorkelled off the front of the homestay. Not much happened until a big school (~25) of monster bumphead parrotfish passed through. Some of them were the biggest I have ever seen. The rest of the afternoon drifted by with a coffee on one beach and a beer or two on two others.



bumphead parrotfish

Fish was back on the menu for dinner. Lucky.

**Day 17 - 26th
November 2014**

A couple of half-hearted walks from the homestay failed to find any different birds. Barry-Sean was even less interested. I was missing the girls but

not half as much as I would have if we'd stayed on Kri.

A fish soup lunch was assimilated in the normal way before a brief afternoon nap (quite out of character, I might add).

At 1330 Yopi took us over to the Friwenbomba Wall for a snorkel along the side of this island. We drifted with the current. The "wall" part of its name stems from the fact that the side of the island that faces Friwen has a cliff as its shoreline. This continues under the water as a steep drop-off. It was very different to other snorkel sites. There were not as many fish, large or small, but lots of odd things – fish not seen elsewhere like reeftop pipefish and various stonefish, along with colourful nudibranchs, mantis shrimps and the best sponges and coral we'd seen in the islands.

About 80 minutes were spent in the water.



A bit of excitement was to follow, as the executives of the Homestay Association came to town to do some inspections. There was Paulus in his best clobber – Aussie T-shirt and cap. He claimed to be from Kangaroo Island, not realising there was such a place. He suggested I hop onto his boat as they were going to Gam Island for a short while before returning. We didn't go to Gam. We managed to get as



far as the other side of Friwen. Sensibly I walked back, lest Barry-Sean never see me again. Paulus further advised that a young New Zealand girl, Katherine, would be joining us from Nudibranch the next day. Hmm, probably not a lesbian, but you never know.

Since we first arrived in Raja Ampat Barry-Sean and I had conducted an afternoon dolphin count. Today's count was very similar to all the others – nil dolphins.

Four newcomers joined us at the homestay. As a consequence we offered to move from the four bedroom house to the one bedroom one; a brilliant move that encouraged us to get some sleep. This exposed one of the quirks of the Raja Ampat homestay electrical system. All of the homestays have generators for electrical power

from early to late evenings. There are usually lots of fluoro lights. What there aren't lots of, are switches for the lights. This means that if one light is on, they all are. Not good for sleeping. It helps being tall and to have climbing skills.

Dinner, fried scad (a fish), was eaten without enthusiasm.

Day 18 - 27th November 2014

Paulus had told us the new guests at the homestay were Swiss. Although they stayed up late and made a fair bit of noise, we noticed no yodelling, clock-making or the opening of banks.

After brekkie we wandered to the island's jetty where there was action a-plenty. A shitty-looking wooden ship was unloading the hardware for a solar power scheme courtesy of the Indonesian government. We later discovered that this was payback for the islanders voting for a certain political candidate. We were also advised that when the power scheme needed maintenance or broke down, that old Melanesian saying "problem belong you" would apply, and that would be the end of that.

Of some significance was a wander past the town lolly shop, managed by the village nurse. This particular lady had introduced herself to me two days earlier. She welcomed me with a "good morning Steve!" Bugger. What was her name? Hmm, thinking, thinking – "good morning Rose!" Now I'm thinking I may have married her by mistake. Oh well, it's the village life for me. Maybe I can get a job fixing the solar power scheme when it breaks.

The tide had flooded sufficiently for me to do my laps without hitting anything pointy, like coral, or limestone islands. Upon emerging I determined to introduce myself to the Swiss folk next door. Who knows, they might be hiding some lesbians they hadn't told us about?

It turns out they were a posse of eco-sustainability consultants from Russia and elsewhere (none Swiss), joined by "stayrajaampat" Doug, the slightly famous website designer. They were being paid from a philanthropic fund donated by the Walton family of Wal-Mart fame. Go figure.

We had a marvellous chat with Aussie-living-in-Bali Doug, creator of the best website I've ever seen. The Russian concurred on this opinion. Handshakes all round. Having stuck the knife into Henke from Wombon Swandiwe to the Homestay Association, I gave it a turn while chatting with Doug. That'll teach him to piss us off!

Doug explained the West Papuan justice system. When a dive resort owned by Europeans on Kri upset the indigenes, they very politely burnt it to the ground. They were very good about it, gently shepherding the guests outside, making sure they had their valuables and passports with them, apologising profusely in advance for making them homeless (and the smoke etc), then lit up.

The "Hero of Raja Ampat" went on to say that when he first came to the islands some four years earlier, he had booked into Mangkor Kodon Homestay well in advance of his arrival. Meanwhile the French "Survivor" TV show block-booked the whole shebang. Mangkor Kodon simply ignored all their other bookings..... The Homestay Association was set up, presumably, to sort this type of thing.

So many of our island experiences were put into context chatting with Doug and the consultants.

Kiwi Katherine arrived. Except she wasn't young or from New Zealand. France is not even close, is it? Nor was she gay or particularly bright. Maybe I could start a company in Raja Ampat that focussed on getting the locals to pay attention?

Meanwhile, in the space of a day, I'd changed from getting sick of looking at birds and fish, to not wanting to leave. The place was starting to creep inside me.



Lunch, various fish cooked various ways, was intimidating. Most of it was returned. Maybe I should have chased down a few of the megapodes.....?

A return snorkel to "The Wall" was booked for 1400. The non-Kiwi Katherine joined us. Much of Katherine's day was taken up complaining

about stuff. Anything from her snorkelling equipment or lack there-of, the tragic state of the French Government or her inability to move for much of the day due to overeating. She didn't seem to have any trouble crowding in front of me if I pointed out photogenic sea critters.....



Upon our return we paid Helen, Yopi's wife, for our time at Famangkor. We did our best to confirm and reconfirm our departure for the next morning to Waisai.

One thing you can say for the dolphins of Raja Ampat – they are easy to count. The afternoon's survey was consistent with the others.

Dinner was fish. This was just as well. My body was starting to crave fish at six hourly intervals.



Day 19 - 28th November 2014

The plan called for a sunrise departure to Waisai in a very leaky boat. Dawn happened as per usual. Disappointingly there was no boat to be seen, leaky or otherwise. I assumed it had sunk. On the way back from the dunny I made a closer inspection of the usual mooring. I failed to detect any dark boat shapes resting peaceably on the coral.

Ultimately Yopi appeared out of his hovel and explained that "The fat guy got eaten by a snake and has gone to heaven. We think the boat has gone there too." We waited anxiously for something to happen, and hoped there were no more snakes about.

My Bahasa translating skills aren't much good. As it turned out, no snake was involved at all. A "fat guy" appeared, apparently unaffected by any celestial journey. We discovered he was Yopi's son-in-law and he had taken the boat, not to heaven, but somewhere else entirely. This constantly smiling gent joined us for the trip to Waisai. This was just great. We needed extra weight in the sinking boat. On the flip side, someone needed to do the constant bailing....



My concern about the likelihood of the boat floundering saw me blow up an inflatable plastic pillow and store it in my pack.

The journey was uneventful, rather pretty and took 40 minutes. Our arrival at the Regional Services Wharf (a pile of rocks near the mangroves) was unheralded and unhurried. Our intelligence on the departure time for the ferry to Sorong was poor. We had an extra hour. The boat left at 0900 or thereabouts, not 0800.

One of the oddities of travel between Sorong and Waisai is the price of the ferry ticket. It costs more to get back to Sorong than it does to get out of the place. Why?

The ticket seller at Waisai tried the old “I’ve got no change” trick; hardly original but occasionally effective with foreigners I guess. Not only did it fail in our case but Barry-Sean neatly stole the guy’s pen. Good work brother.

The passage was again speedy and incident-free. A number of small flocks of red-necked phalaropes were seen, along with various terns, lesser frigatebirds, a flock of red-footed boobies and a single pomerine jaeger.

We caught a “taxi” to the JE Meridien Hotel, Sorong, where we checked in for three nights.

We organised to go to a forest the next day after contacting John Arbon, a local West Papuan ‘Mr Fixit’. This was on the recommendation of “Stayrajaampat Doug”. John came to the hotel with Dek, his “Robin”, to nut out some sort of plan.

We had dinner at an eatery near the hotel. Even though every cell in my body craved fish, I bravely resisted and had chicken.

Day 20 - 29th November 2014

Persistent wailing from a nearby mosque ensured that a hotel alarm call wasn't really necessary. John and Dek were waiting outside at 0600, sans vehicle. Apparently John's taxi-owning "friend" had tried to jack the hourly rate at the last minute. This led to several taxi drivers on the street being interviewed but nobody was interested in the gig. Eventually one guy hesitated long enough for all of us to pile in. By the time he worked out he didn't want to play, the taxi was in motion and he acquiesced.

We passed Sorong's rubbish tip. We seriously didn't need to see that. Shortly thereafter, at a site known as "Macbon" (the spelling will be wrong), we started to see trees and birds so we stopped. There were birds everywhere. Two things then happened – the traffic started to increase to the point where it was constant and the sun got higher in the sky. Nowhere do birds go to sleep faster than New Guinea. The morning cost us the better part of \$A70 for the taxi and a donation for John.



I'd been told that Sorong was Asia's most boring city. It's not that good. It's dirty and lacks any form of planning. A walk around the streets failed to find any redeeming features. Then the day grew older, school was out and the number of "hullo mister's" increased. We started to focus on the people and not anything else. Here there was some joy – the people of Sorong are excellent.

We happened upon the markets. Many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of stalls sold everything from fish to fashion. There was tuna-on-a-stick, fruit and veg, clothes, fireworks, pharmaceuticals, tropical diseases, phobias relating to crowded



spaces, a training course in trip hazards and a cure for depression for those from western countries. Other than that it was boring. The stallholders were overwhelmingly friendly.





West Papuan women - Sorong markets

Beer and peanuts in the hotel café topped off our peripatetic perambulation just nicely. Dinner, again chicken, was enjoyed at the same local restaurant patronised the night before.

Day 21 - 30th November 2014

Dek was to pick me up at 0600 and take me to “Hutong Lindu” a.k.a. Taman Wisata Alam Sorong, some kind of national park. By 0615 I figured he wasn’t coming so I started asking taxi drivers. Furious honking from a motorcycle across the road heralded Dek’s arrival. Off we went. I was quite unsure what to expect. We had been told that the park was tiny, with few trees, or, alternatively, was humongous with big trees. The road was variously described as despicable or fabulous. It may or may not have been co-located with a football stadium.

We passed under a concrete archway with hornbills painted on it – this looked promising. An abandoned office sat nearby. The forest then begins and goes on and on and on. Stop the bike! Over 40 species of bird were seen in the next few hours. Many more were heard. Fruit doves and parrots were prolific. During the first hour it was impossible NOT to see multiple different birds in every direction. It was close to the best tropical birding I’ve experienced.

The road through the park was well maintained and carried almost no traffic at the time of my visit. I picked up five “lifers” – large fig-parrot, yellow-capped pygmy-parrot, orange-fronted hanging-parrot, Zoe’s imperial-pigeon and golden myna. This is an excellent site just 15 minutes from the airport.

I tipped Dek handsomely (in local terms) and returned to the hotel. Later in the day Barry-Sean and I returned to Taman Wisata, this time via the service of a share taxi – for 50 cents each. A great day!



Day 22 - 1st December 2014

Rain looked to interfere with my last morning “in the field”. Bugger it, what’s the worst that can happen? I caught a share taxi – held together by nylon rope, cable ties and cheap welding jobs - back to Taman Wisata. It didn’t rain but it was cloudy and less birdy as a result. This meant that there were only a couple of different birds in view at all times rather than half a dozen. Four more lifers were added – thick-billed ground-pigeon (!), streak-headed mannikin, red-fronted lorikeet and Wallace’s fairy-wren – all excellent birds.

I noticed that the park had once enjoyed a lot of infrastructure that had subsequently gone to seed. Picnic grounds, lots of concrete pathways, gardens, bridges and other structures had all fallen into disrepair. I was later told that a change of government was the cause. Sounds just like Australia.

We achieved a 1300 check-out from the hotel. Our flight from Sorong to Makassar, and onwards to Denpasar and Sydney, was due to leave at 1605. We caught a hotel courtesy vehicle to the airport (located directly across the road) on account of the arrival of a thunderstorm and torrential rain. We soon checked in. Things went a tad pear-shaped from there....

A harbinger of things to come may have been the security guy at the hand-carry scanner, who failed to be distracted from playing games on his phone no matter how many bags went through his machine. Did he know the bags weren’t going very far?

The Garuda check-in staff tracked us down in the disgusting terminal to tell us that our flight was delayed due to widespread thunderstorms. The good news was that they managed to squeeze us on to an earlier flight – that was also delayed, but not by as much.

A few other punters – all western in appearance – were taking a much dimmer view of proceedings than me. This was a case where the “Dance of the Seven Jumping Jews”, though entertaining, would not have caused a plane to materialise no matter how good the choreography. Tragically, the Garuda staff kept telling everyone that those with onward connections would all get to their final destinations, as the various planes would be ‘held’ for them.

The good news just kept on flowing. A plane took us to Makassar, a few hours late. We were first off the tarmac bus to the transfer desk. Hurry! They said the plane to Denpasar was waiting to leave at Gate 2. A very pleasant gentleman at Gate 2 invited us to relax and have a seat. Hmm. What about the plane? Oh, that plane; it’s gone already. The chap then vanished, in the irreversible way that only senior airport staff manage to achieve. Meanwhile English Eddie, a pissed off punter also trying to get to Denpasar, spat it. He demanded of another Garuda staffer to be put on a plane, any plane really, and no further chat was to be entered into. A long and tortured tour of parts of the terminal generally off-limits to passengers followed. I started to fear for my kidneys and other valuable body parts.

Two other Bali-bound passengers were waiting for us at the Makassar Garuda Buggered-up-true Missed Flight Office.



Sometime later we found ourselves at the Ibis Hotel, Makassar Airport. The hotel’s rooms had won an international award in 2013 for “The Best Hotel Room Designed like a Prison Cell”. We had dinner delivered. The packaging it arrived in completely filled the cell’s rubbish bin and much of the free space on the floor.

Day 23 - 2nd December 2014

We unfolded ourselves from the Ibis and checked in our baggage for an early morning flight to Denpasar. In a rare moment of foresight we'd taken clothes and toiletries from our checked-in luggage and put it in our daypacks. The young lady at check-in checked our bags through to Sydney (or so she said).

Our next stop was once more the Makassar Garuda Bugged-up-true Missed Flight Office to pick up a cryptic piece of paper that was to gain us a free hotel, transfers and meals for a day in Kuta, Bali, given that we had the best part of 12 hours to kill in that fair town.

A smiling Garuda staffer met us on arrival at Denpasar. We were whisked away to the Denpasar Garuda Bugged-up-true Missed Flight Office where a courtesy van took us to the Kuta Ibis Hotel, a much nicer establishment, with excellent rooms. Lunch and dinner in the hotel's restaurant were delicious and fish-free.



A wander around Kuta is always fascinating. Significantly I have now been to Kuta twice; despite not wanting to go there on either occasion. A part of me gets why youngsters might flock to Kuta – the lack of laws relating to “having a good time”, the chance of sex (paid for or otherwise) and the chance to show off

your passport to your friends when you get home. Why older married couples – and there were plenty of these – go there, remains a mystery.

I changed my unused rupiah back to Aussie dollars and bought the customary amount of DVD movies. Just how do they do it for the price?

The 1030 flight to Sydney left and arrived on time. The most interesting thing to happen occurred at the crowded departure gate at Denpasar Airport where, in view of hundreds, a rather attractive young lady lay out her mat and performed her yoga routine. She had skin-tight pants (called mumblers by some...). Unknown to her, she had sat in some liquid. Some of her positions had fellow travellers and airport staff in stitches (or hiding away cringing) as she presented her stained womanhood to the world

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