

SSCA Cruising Bulletin
August 2010

DreamKeeper – 40' Pacific Seacraft – 5.5' draft – April 2009
Subject area: **Palau, Micronesia, to Raja Ampat, Indonesia**

Dear SSCA,

Palau has been high on our must-visit list since we left San Francisco on our circumnavigation two years ago, and it did not disappoint. The lure for us was the stunning anchorages, incredible diving and the kindness of the people. There have been other articles written about Palau in the past, so we won't go into the specific details here, but we will reiterate what has already been said about Palau being a fantastic cruising destination and a great wintertime home base. It is fast, easy and inexpensive to get parts shipped from the U.S. (Palau is a protectorate of the U.S. and uses USPS shipping rates). Sam's Tours graciously welcomes cruisers and serves as a laid-back waterhole and home base. Options for provisioning are diverse and relatively well priced. There are a multitude of unique Rock Island anchorages that are all surprisingly beautiful and secure. On top of all that, we concur that it is one of the best scuba diving locations in the world.

We arrived in Palau, Micronesia, at the beginning of December 2008 after some excellent cruising and adventuring through Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and a few islands in Papua New Guinea. We spent four months in Palau and could have stayed much longer. While we were there, about 20 or more yachts arrived *en route* to the Philippines. A few boats had been there for six months to over a year and some for years. We, along with our German friends, Harry and Heidi on the yacht *Alk*, took a different route. The two of us planned on heading south again, across the equator and entering Indonesia through the "backdoor" in West Papua, Indonesia. We were both traveling separately with different plans for Indonesia, but it was fun to have one other boat that was going to pull off a more adventurous route through this fascinating part of the world.

Logistics and Paperwork

As most of you know, to enter Indonesia you need to plan ahead and do your homework. Having at least a couple of months to get all the paperwork sorted is the reality, so start early, and you shouldn't have a problem. Don't think you have to be part of the Indonesian Rally to travel through this interesting country. It's not very difficult, and we had no trouble at all. No Indonesian official ever mentioned anything about the "so called" bond that everyone was freaking out about. Maybe it will have changed in a year, but I doubt it. If you have your paperwork in order and you present yourself in a clean and professional manner, you shouldn't have any issues. At least we didn't.

Step 1: Acquire an Indonesian cruising permit (CAIT). The best place to do this is to go through Bali Marina, www.balimarina.com. They have most of this information on their website, but once you email them directly, they will walk you through the process. You will have to do an electronic payment to them for both the CAIT and the Social Visa Sponsor Letter. Make sure you

list every possible place you might stop on your CAIT application form, including Raja Ampat. You don't have to go everywhere, but if you decide to, then you won't have a problem. The CAIT is good for three months, so if you plan on renewing it or leaving the country before it expires, plan accordingly where you will end up. We planned on being in Bali within three months, and this worked out perfectly. It is easy to renew your CAIT through Bali Marina for another three months.

Step 2: Once you have been sent your CAIT and Social Visa Sponsorship Letter from Bali Marina, you will need to get a Social Visa for your passport. If you don't get a Social Visa, then you are only allowed one month total in Indonesia, so pay the money and get it.

We found two ways to do this. Our German friends found someone to send their passports to in Manila, Philippines, and had their visas done there with little trouble. They were really crossing their fingers, though, and you will have to do the research to find a safe and reliable way to do this.

We sent our passports safely and easily to Travel Docs in San Francisco, CA, www.traveldocs.com, and they did all the work for us at the Indonesian Consulate. I think we paid around \$75 per person for both the visa and their service, before shipping. The Social Visa gives you 60 days initially when you enter Indonesia, and then you will have to renew it every month after that. Our plan was to be in Ambon to renew it within two months, which we did, and we had no problems with renewing it there. We told the officials in Ambon that Bali Marina was our "sponsor," and they seemed fine with it. We then renewed our visa again in Bali a month after that.

Step 3: Do a big provision and stock up on the goodies. Palau is great for this, and you can manage to find a pretty good selection of foods, hardware, engine oil, fishing gear, etc. Also, you should definitely make a stop at Helen Reef in southern Palau on the way to Sorong. There will probably be two to four rangers living on little bird- and turtle-filled Helen Reef, and they will not only love your company, but also anything you can bring down to them. If you put out the word that you are heading to Helen Reef at Sam's Tours, then you will definitely reach locals who are family members of the rangers, and they'll bring you some things to take to the guys. We brought a couple of boxes of goodies for them from their families, but wish we would have brought more on our own accord. Fresh fruit, veggies, any canned goods, DVDs and music, and especially a bundle of fresh betel nut will all be greatly appreciated.

Heading South to Sorong, West Papua, Indonesia

Helen Reef

We stayed a week anchored in front of this little island and could have stayed a month. The three rangers that were there, Paul, Hercules and David, were all wonderful guys and treated us like family. We hung out with them daily, spearfishing, playing chess and having little reef and crayfish barbeques at their compound. At night we would accompany them on turtle patrol; we searched for turtle tracks, nesting turtles and hatching nests. We even got to see some hawksbill mommas laying eggs. Lucky us.

The rangers will probably have a VHF on when you get close to Helen and will try to call you. They actually came out in their little skiff, which we towed behind *DreamKeeper* while the guys came on board and piloted us through the narrow reef entrance and through the scattered coral *bomies* up to Helen Island. Helen Reef was definitely a highlight of our year.

Helen to Sorong, Indonesia

We had a pretty easy and uneventful passage except for one awful night traveling through a major rain and thunder/lightning storm, which we think was the ITCZ. We got hammered for about 12 hours overnight in pitch black conditions, big seas and 30+ knots of wind with driving rain. Sailing, steering and using the radar were useless. We hove-to and waited it out. Thankfully, in the morning it cleared up, and we motor-sailed away to the south.

Keep a lookout for debris in these waters. We saw everything from huge slicks of trash to massive trees floating in the currents. On a positive note, when crossing the last bay between Waigeo Island and the mainland of West Papua, where Sorong is located, we saw whales, big pods of dolphins and even a sunfish (mola-mola) on the surface.

Checking into Sorong, Indonesia

Also called So-Wrong, this commercial city is not the most beautiful, nor the most interesting, but a place to just “get it done” and move on. Finding a place to anchor is a bit tricky. We went to the big main ferry dock called Port of Sorong and med-moored with long stern lines next to where the ferries tie up. Call the harbormaster on the way in. Holding is in soft mud, so be aware and put out lots of rode; we drug here once in a big squall. You will be watched all day/night here by curious locals and kids. The dingy access to the jetty is poor. Think about keeping someone always on the boat. We did and felt better about it. Overall, it is not a great place to tie up, but it is a convenient spot to check into the country and get some provisioning done. Be ready for culture shock.

One of the guys in the ferry building who spoke English gave us directions to Immigration, Customs and Quarantine. Immigration is within walking distance, but you’ll need a *tuk-tuk* or taxi to get to Customs and Quarantine. Quarantine is a little difficult to find, but the officials there are friendly. They’ll give you a big green health/quarantine book with all the stamps that you will take with you through Indonesia. Customs took a while, and I had to go back a couple of times. For us, one officer wanted to “see” our boat and drove me down to the dock. He came onboard for only a little bit and poked around. No problem. *Alk* had a different experience with five Customs officers all poking around for an hour late at night, but still with no problems.

When asked who our sponsor was, we told Immigration that Bali Marina was our sponsor; it seemed to work. *Alk* said they had no sponsor and then were required to find a local to be their sponsor and pay them some money. It was a bit expensive and time-consuming for them, but worked out in the end. Basically, expect check-in to take a couple of days. Do dress nicely in shoes, a collared shirt and pants, and present yourself professionally. Also, make sure you have a boat-stamp; you can get these in Palau if you don’t have one yet.

Only a few sailing yachts check in at Sorong every year, so expect a little bit of hassle from the officials as they really aren't used to us yachties. In our experience, everyone was very friendly, and no one asked for handouts, even though we were prepared to help "grease the wheels" in case it came down to that.

If you need diesel, we found a fuel boat at approximately 00°50.3'S, 131°13.5'E. There is an old, black, rusty boat here that you can anchor next to if you come in the bay during the night or off hours too. The fuel boat is close by next to the shore. Go alongside to tie up for diesel and work out the price with the guys. We paid about 6,000 rupiah/liter, cash only, in April/May 2009. It was clean and easy, and the guys were really nice. This is a good place to anchor outside of town if you are coming/going from Sorong.

If you plan on diving, you should get a Raja Ampat dive tag. When we were there, it was \$50 USD per person. All divers are required to have the tag to dive in Raja Ampat. Locating the sales person in Sorong was tricky for us. It would be easier to ask Kri or Misool if you can buy one through them if you plan on visiting the resorts.

The Islands and Underwater World of Raja Ampat

Raja Ampat, "The Four Kings," is considered the most biologically diverse marine ecosystem in the world. Nutrient rich water, a massive diversity of species, karst limestone rock islands and an abundance of fascinating lagoons, bays, estuaries and anchorages with barely anyone around, the entire region of Raja Ampat is a true gem. The only tourists who come here are hardcore scuba divers and big-time bird lovers and a few sailing yachts each year.

Raja Ampat Details

Anchoring: Plan on most anchorages being deep, usually 20+ meters, but sometimes 30-40 meters. Yes, meters. So plan accordingly. Also, you will benefit from having at least one very long line to tie off your stern in tight spots. Often we found ourselves with our bow anchor dropped in a little basin and either a stern anchor out or a long stern line tied off to a sharp limestone wall. Some anchorages have nylon loops of line already attached to rocks that are used by fishing boats and live-aboard dive boats; you can tie off to them if no one is on them.

Underwater Visibility: The best months to be in Raja Ampat for good visibility are November through March. We arrived in April and didn't leave until mid-May and never had amazing visibility underwater. It wasn't bad, but by the time we left Misool, it was getting pretty green. It's difficult to be here any sooner or you will be coming south in the NW monsoon—not bad around the equator, but if you keep traveling SW towards Bali, you may be beating. Regardless, the snorkeling and diving was still incredible.

Dangers: Malaria and dengue fever can be a problem. Do take precautions. Also, before jumping in the water anywhere, it's best to get some local info about crocodiles and currents. Some of the inner mangroves and estuaries are definitely croc territory. Don't just swim anywhere; you have now entered the world of West Papua.

Resources: The only cruising guide we could find was the *Southeast Asia Cruising Guide Volume II*. It doesn't offer much in terms of this area, but still helps with a good overview and the weather and current patterns. You will want it anyway if heading further west into Indonesia and up towards SE Asia.

If you do your research, you will find plenty of live-aboard diving itineraries, well written recent articles about this area, as well as good insight, from both the Kri Eco-Resort and Misool Eco-Resort websites. Try to get a book on Alfred Russel Wallace, Darwin's colleague, who did some fascinating research and exploration in this part of the world and who was quite a character.

Northern Raja Ampat

Raja Ampat has both a northern group of islands and a southern group. We spent about 2 ½ weeks in the northern group, then went back to Sorong for diesel and fresh food before moving to the southern group of Raja Ampat for a couple more weeks, where we then departed to the Bandas Islands.

There are so many places you can explore in northern Raja Ampat. We only went to a few, but loved it. I am not going to include waypoints as this is truly a more adventurous cruising ground, and we will try to keep it that way. Some of our favorites were Penemu Island (look for the sneaky channel to bring your boat inside the inner lagoon to anchor amidst the rock islands), Waigeo, Uranie, Kri and, our favorite, Pulau Wayag.

If you're a scuba diver, then we would recommend paying a visit to Kri Eco-resort and doing some diving with them. The owner, Max Ammer, has been in this area for over 20 years and runs Papua Diving and the two resorts at Kri Island. He welcomes yachts to come visit and do some diving with them. Also, if you want info on great dive spots you can access on your own, as well as info on where you can hire guides to visit the "birds of paradise" and other adventures, he is your man. Max is a wealth of knowledge and is also doing a lot of work in these islands with local communities and conservation groups to keep this part of Indonesia healthy. It's best to contact Max and Kri Eco-Resort ahead of time to make sure they aren't too busy and to be respectful. This address worked for us: max@papua-diving.com.

If you visit Kri, then you will anchor in the strong current-swept channel in front of the jetty of Kri Eco-Resort. Go about 400 meters past the jetty on the northern side of Kri Island and drop your hook in 35-45 meters; very deep, but good holding. The currents here sometimes run 3+ knots, so put out everything you have. We attached our chain and rode together and put out 280' of chain with an additional 100' of rode. We also used an "anchor buddy." We didn't have a problem with dragging, but the strong currents were pretty intense.

The snorkeling in the channel and around Kri corner is excellent! You can expect to see anything here. If diving, don't miss Kri Corner, Chicken Reef, Sardine Reef and the giant manta hangout. The dive site called The Channel is supposed to be excellent too, but we didn't make it there.

Southern Raja Ampat and Pulau Misool

After a return to Sorong to check out and provision and re-fuel, we headed to the southern group through Selat Sagewin (heads up on the super strong currents through here—we encountered over 5 knots) based around the huge island of Pulau Misool, also called Pulau Batanme. Once again there are so many places to explore, but we had a lot of rainy weather and mostly stayed at Pulau Wagmab (another gem with amazing soft corals, huge schools of bumphead parrotfish with hornbills and cockatoos flying around us and wild orchids growing in the rock faces) and then over to Batbitem Island where the new Misool Eco-Resort is up and running.

Like Max and Kri Eco-Resort, it's best to email ahead of time and check in with Misool to see if they are open to visiting yachts. They are more of a “package dive tour” place, and anchoring here is not possible because of the coral. They have a mooring you may be able to use, but, like I said, email beforehand (www.misoolcoresort.com, info@misoolcoresort.com).

Andrew and Marit, the managers who run Misool Eco Resort, are wonderful people, and we made good friends with them by the time we left. They are doing an amazing job working with the local people to create a large MPA (marine protected area) around this area. The resort is not only aesthetically beautiful, but is truly “eco” too: 90% built with driftwood they hauled over from the remote beaches of Pulau Seram and milled on site. This was no easy task, and countless hours of work and sweat went into this. If they can't accommodate you for diving, I'm sure they could offer some good suggestions for your own personal adventures or personal diving ideas if you are equipped with a compressor on your yacht.

We fell in love with this area and had a difficult time leaving. Just on the Misool Eco-Resort house reef alone we saw gray reef sharks, green and hawksbill turtles, big schools of bumphead parrotfish, nudibranchs galore, three species of pygmy seahorses, orangutan crabs, scorpion fish, huge schools of trevally and an incredible diversity of sponges and soft corals. The night diving here is also excellent!

Moving On from Raja Ampat

We left the southern Raja Ampat islands around Pulau Misool at the end of May. The weather was definitely turning into the SW Monsoon, and we started having some strong winds and seas from the SE, as expected. We picked a decent weather window and then beat into them for a couple of days before rounding the eastern tip of Pulau Seram and heading to the Bandas Islands. After a great time in the Bandas (another highlight), we sailed to Pulau Ambon to renew our visas and re-provision before continuing to head west towards Flores, Komodo and Bali. To read our stories and see our images from this part of our journey, feel free to check out our website at: www.svdreamkeeper.com.

ASSOCIATES GAR DUKE AND NICOLE FRIEND