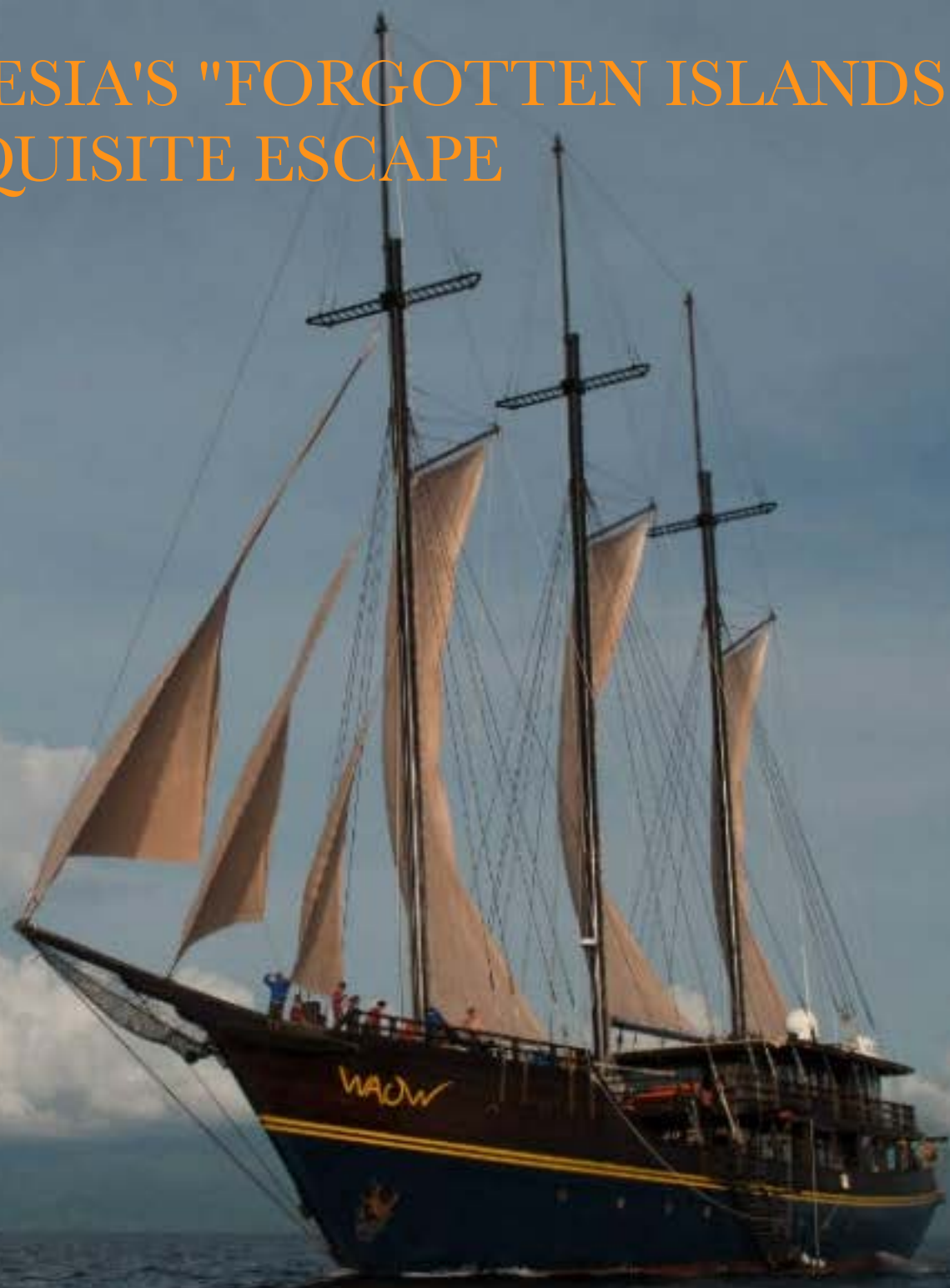


## INDONESIA'S "FORGOTTEN ISLANDS" : AN EXQUISITE ESCAPE



The WAOW boat is pictures sailing in Indonesian waters.



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Indonesia's Forgotten Islands are among the most isolated parts of South East Asia. These islands and the seas connecting them are rich in wildlife, both on land and underwater; the people who reside there are almost completely independent of the outside world.

I joined the luxury diving boat WAOW (Water Adventure Ocean Wide) on its maiden trip to the islands for two weeks because I wanted to visit this isolated area and dive sites that have rarely or never been visited before.

"There were no flights to this area until last year," says Reto Schlapfer, our cruise director, a 39-year-old Swiss expat and an experienced diver and sailor, who has been living in Indonesia for more than ten years. "Ninety-five per cent of Indonesians [have] never heard of them. I've always been excited to visit the islands and dive around them myself."

The WAOW is a marvellous piece of engineering. One of the biggest of its kind, its 60-metre hull is built traditionally from wood, but utilises modern engines. Onboard, passengers can enjoy its spaciousness and unmatched comfort. It offers visitors world-class diving experiences and memorable adventures on the islands.

It is believed that 80 per cent of all marine species can be found in Indonesian waters. In two weeks, I saw more species than I did in ten years of diving around the world. On the very first dive, I encountered a pygmy sea horse, a frogfish and the magical mimic octopus, and some of the healthiest and brightest corals I've ever seen.

Night dives were an explosion of life with incredibly exotic creatures covering the seabed. Each small area revealed numerous different species of nudibranches, exotic worms, octopuses and crabs. We even saw the very rare Weedy Rhinopias.

We weren't disappointed when it came to bigger creatures: around the island of Gunung Api, we saw sea snakes everywhere. We witnessed a black-and-white sea snake catching and eating a catfish. While the snakes are poisonous, they are not aggressive with divers.

The waters surrounding the islands usually bring visitors from the deep. The highlight for me was being few metres away from a great hammerhead shark twice, at depths of 15 metres and 40 metres. We saw many other species of sharks during the trip, as well as a three-metre-long marlin and numerous schools of barracudas, jacks, rainbow runners and batfishes.

Locals at the Forgotten Islands are known to be very protective about their waters. In the past, villagers used primitive weapons like bows and arrows to send foreign boats away; this has helped keep industrial fishing boats away and maintain a reasonably healthy fish population.

When we reached a new site, Reto, who speaks flawless Indonesian, and other members of the crew would meet the locals with presents and explain that we are here only to dive and not to fish, after which we were treated like guests.

The first interaction I had with the residents of Palau Pura village was underwater, during an early morning dive. We watched as the free-diving fishermen plunged into the depths to hunt fish. Their tools are a small wooden boat, hand-made spears and goggles made from wood and glass, put together using gum extracted from trees. These men can dive to nearly 30 metres and hold their breath for three minutes at a time.

WAOW has been sailing the Indonesian waters for the last three years, offering adventures and diving in luxury settings to wonderful destinations around the archipelago.

Reto comments, "Our guests are usually of a high income bracket; they are adventurous people who want to discover new and remote destinations, [but] in luxury surroundings."

The huge ship was built from the vision of its owner and designer, Michel Deville, a retired Swiss businessman with a passion for diving and art. He drew the initial design and went around the world trying to find a builder who could construct a ship this large. Ten years later, he met Haji Abdul Wahab, a master builder from Kalimantan, the Indonesian part of Borneo. Both Haji's abilities and the great diving in Indonesia led them to construct the boat here.

Haji's knowledge was complemented by the experience of Andrew Laughlin, an Australian boat expert and diving instructor hired by Michel to overlook the project. The two started to build the boat in the Kalimantan jungle using only traditional methods. The entire hull and mainframe of the ship were built by hand before it was moved to Bali, where the engines were added and the finishing was done.

The WAOW is also a floating boutique hotel. The smallest room is 24 square metres and the Master room is 45 sq m. They are beautifully decorated and equipped with all amenities, from a big-screen TV to satellite internet connection. This kind of space is unheard of in similar live-aboard diving boats.

"The first thing that WAOW offers guests is space, both in the rooms and in the common areas," Michel explains. "It [gives you] room if to socialize or to enjoy your privacy." Twenty-one members of the crew are always present on the ship to host 19 guests. The kitchen offers three excellent meals every day, in addition to snacks and drinks throughout the day.

The boat also has a state-of-the-art dive shop offering excellent equipment. The crew also offer many activities like kayaks and inland trips to non-divers, in addition to a spa and massage service onboard.

The trip was exceptional. We discovered entirely new diving sites, interacted with rare species, met wonderful villagers and fishermen, and enjoyed the WAOW's tasteful luxury. It all ended with a bang, literally, as we anchored few hundred metres from the erupting Komba volcano. We could hear and see an explosion every twenty minutes, sending red lava into the sky, forming massive clouds of dense smoke – Mother Nature at work in real time as a new island emerges from the sea.

Yazan Neme, Indonesia